

# Vidunda (G38) as an Endangered Language?

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## 1. The position of Swahili and other Tanzanian languages

Tanzania is a multi-ethnic and, as a consequence, multi-lingual country. This fact is reflected in the existence of approximately 120 ethnonyms according to the 1967 population census (Tanzania 1971). The most recent edition of *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005) lists 128 languages (of which one is extinct) and glossonyms accordingly. This number recently grew even bigger when the results of a country-wide survey under the auspices of LoT<sup>1</sup> were released (LoT 2006). Thus, the survey added approximately 80 more glossonyms to the existing lists published by, for example, Polomé & Hill (1980) and *Ethnologue*.

As known, many glossonyms refer to language varieties which are mutually intelligible with those spoken mainly by neighboring ethnic groups or nationalities. People who claim to speak a language of their own frequently understand that of their neighbors, although the latter's variety is terminologically distinct from the former.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the high number of glossonyms is linguistically not relevant for adequately describing the factual situation, which is often characterized by a dialect continuum. In other words, dialect clusters which are comprised of "languages" (as expressed by particular glossonyms) may definitely reduce the number of Tanzanian languages. However, to which number a necessary linguistic and terminological recategorization may ultimately lead is still an open question.

The informal and formal spread of Swahili (henceforth called L2) as a language of wider distribution/*lingua franca* (the national and co-official<sup>3</sup> language; see Legère 2006b for discussion) has increasingly limited the use of all other Tanzanian languages (henceforth referred to as L1s). In fact, in most formal domains Swahili is dominant. The prominent role of Swahili is mainly the result of its official status, which has been supported by significant language policy decisions after 1961 until quite recently, when in 1997 the cultural policy document "Sera ya Utamaduni" (Tanzania 1997) was published.

The strong impact of L2 everywhere in the country and its harmful effect on the use of L1s in Tanzania Mainland is a generally acknowledged fact. Details of the gradual marginalization of L1 were analyzed in various parts of the country and published in case studies by authors like Mekacha (1993) for the Nata area, Stegen (2003) among Rangi speakers of Kondoa District,<sup>4</sup> Wedin (2004) for North West Tanzania, Msanjila (2003), Mkude (2001, 2003), or at the 2004 LoT conference "Lugha za Tanzania" (here in particular the papers by Kahigi, Madumulla and Rubanza). My own research in the 1970's (Legère 1981), covering approximately 2000 people, described the situation on a wider scale presenting survey data from a couple of districts and selected ethnic groups of Bantu and non-Bantu origin.

Whiteley (1969) postulated that the position of L2 (Swahili) is less strong in ethnically homogeneous areas up-country, where the ethnic homogeneity results in a far-reaching linguistic homogeneity. This situation can be assumed to be conducive for the wide-spread use of L1. This seems

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<sup>1</sup> LoT stands for "Languages of Tanzania", which is a SIDA/SAREC (Swedish International Development Agency/Swedish African Research Cooperation) funded project that is jointly implemented by the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Gothenburg.

<sup>2</sup> For some details see Polomé & Hill (1980).

<sup>3</sup> Alongside English.

<sup>4</sup> See also Legère (1992b) for a study of the same area that includes the non-Bantu Sandawe.

to be logical because people in an ethno-linguistically homogeneous area can thoroughly use their L1 when speaking to each other, as anybody who is spoken to is supposed to be similarly proficient in this L1. Immigrants to the area often learn the particular L1, the longer they live among these L1 speakers.

## 2. Identifying an endangered language

Over the past fifteen years, the discussion of language endangerment, vitality, maintenance, language revival and other related themes has made substantial progress. There are valuable published contributions with regard to Africa, ranging from Brenzinger (1992) to Batibo (2005) or Grenoble & Lindsay (1998) and Grenoble & Lindsay (2006) for a general approach. International attention also includes specific funding activities by, for example, the Hans Rausing Foundation in UK, the Volkswagen Foundation in Germany, the Linguistics Program of the National Science Foundation, and particularly "Documenting Endangered Languages" (DEL), etc. In addition, conferences and other gatherings focus on these themes, such as the 2003 International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages in Paris,<sup>5</sup> in 2006 the Georgetown University Round Table Conference in Georgetown/Washington DC. and others.

Continuous committed work on endangered languages and their preservation by a UNESCO ad hoc expert group resulted in submission of substantial research findings to the aforementioned Paris 2003 conference and the public. The material aims at facilitating the identification of endangered languages and a more precise description of the endangerment extent at the grassroots. In this context, the following nine factors of "Language Vitality and Endangerment" (UNESCO 2003b) were deemed to be relevant for studies in this field:

- Factor 1. Intergenerational language transmission (scale)<sup>6</sup>
- Factor 2. Absolute number of speakers (real numbers)
- Factor 3. Proportion of speakers within the total population (scale)
- Factor 4. Trends in existing language domains (scale)
- Factor 5. Response to new domains and media (scale)
- Factor 6. Materials for language education and literacy (scale)
- Factor 7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use (scale)
- Factor 8. Community members' attitudes toward their own language (scale)
- Factor 9. Amount and quality of documentation (scale)<sup>7</sup>

These factors will be taken into consideration in the course of this paper.

An example which rates official attitudes especially toward L1 is given in Table 1 on p. 45.<sup>8</sup>

## 3. The research area

As a research object the Vidunda language (autonym "Chividunda", G38 in referential classification, Guthrie 1970) was selected for the remoteness of the area where this L1 is spoken. In addition, this area offers a linguistic situation which, as the result of an almost 100 percent ethnic homogeneity supposes a dominant role of L1 (and, as a consequence, a subordinate position of Swahili).<sup>9</sup> Another reason for this selection was the fact that the Vidunda ethnic group and its language accordingly are small in numbers. In the 1967 population census (Tanzania 1971), which was the last one to record ethnicity, Vidunda people were below 20,000 (exactly 19,585 people identified themselves as members of the Vidunda ethnic group). Currently the total population in the Vidunda

<sup>5</sup> See UNESCO (2003a) for the recommendations.

<sup>6</sup> A six-point scale reflects various stages of endangerment.

<sup>7</sup> Source: UNESCO (2003b), slightly modified.

<sup>8</sup> Source: UNESCO (2003b).

<sup>9</sup> Postulated by Whiteley (1969), see above.

core area —the Vidunda Ward of Kilosa District/Morogoro Region in Central Tanzania— is approximately 10,000 people (in the 2002 census the Ward population was 9,794 people).<sup>10</sup> Vidunda is not spoken outside the particular ethnic group. Thus, for the low number of speakers this L1 is theoretically more vulnerable to language shift than a L1 with tens or hundreds of thousands of speakers.

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes toward Language
<i>equal support</i>	5	All languages are protected.
<i>differentiated support</i>	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
<i>passive assimilation</i>	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
<i>active assimilation</i>	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
<i>forced assimilation</i>	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected.
<i>prohibition</i>	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

**Table 1.** Rating of official attitudes

Virtually no linguistic research had been conducted so far. Accordingly, almost no reliable linguistic data were available<sup>11</sup> prior to a research project which, since 2003, has dealt with names and uses of wild plants in this language.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, first results which emanate from the field work have already been published (see Legère, S. Maganga & P. Mkwana'hembo 2004, Legère 2006a, Legère & Mkwana'hembo 2006), and more data are available as manuscripts. The survey summary presented below is a byproduct of the above mentioned research, with the cooperation of the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics (University of Dar es Salaam) within the framework of the LoT project.<sup>13</sup>

Vidunda Ward, which is home to the Vidunda L1 is situated in mountains which reach up to 1600 meters above sea level. There is just one narrow steep road that leads to Vidunda village from Kidoti in the valley, and it can only be managed by 4x4 cars. Other villages or hamlets of the Ward are not accessible by car at all, since there is no road. However, many villagers, although complaining about the lack of adequate transport facilities, are good walkers and climbers. Therefore, most of them maintain regular contacts with people within the ward as well as with the ethnically heterogeneous settlements in the valley and beyond, where they practice and expand their L2 proficiency. There are a

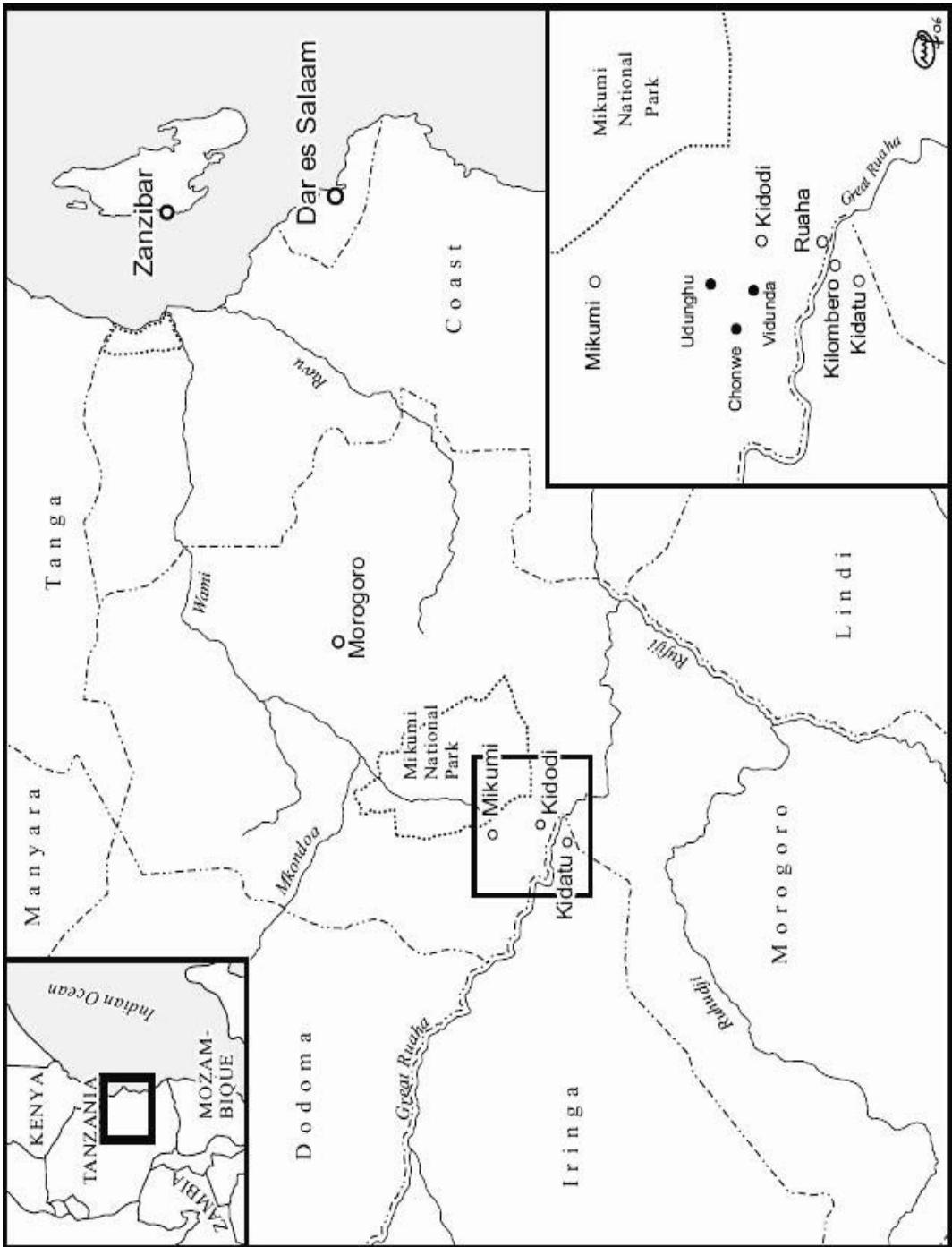
<sup>10</sup> Source: Tanzania (2003: 61).

<sup>11</sup> In the 19th century Last (1885) published a short vocabulary of this L1. The area where Vidunda is spoken was also indicated in a language map.

<sup>12</sup> “Wild plant names in Bantu languages” —this project (co-researcher is Christina Thornell) is funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Jubileumsfonden). It also includes research on the Mpiemo language of the Central African Republic and the Kwangali language (Namibia).

<sup>13</sup> The SIDA/SAREC and Jubileumsfonden support for enabling the author to embark on Vidunda language issues is gratefully acknowledged.

few immigrants from other ethnic groups (teachers in the village schools, the priest and staff of the Roman Catholic parish or hospital in Vidunda village and spouses), who are not Vidunda mother tongue speakers but who learned this L1 in due course.



**Map 1.** Eastern Tanzania and the Vidunda core area (insert) marked as black dots

Even if the area is remote, its inhabitants do not live an isolated life. As people grow vegetables, maize, beans, etc., the surplus is sold by the producers at local markets or shipped to Morogoro, Dar es Salaam, etc. In addition, via the district, ward and village administrative structure, the CCM<sup>14</sup> party cells, the health center, the church and other institutions, formal contacts with the “outside” world are maintained. Thus, administrative officers come to see the ward and village authorities, health workers are seconded to the Roman Catholic hospital or the Vidunda Health Centre. Moreover, employees of the neighboring Kilombero Sugar Estate<sup>15</sup> and other persons from outside regularly come to Vidunda Ward on duty. In fact, despite the remoteness of the area, there are multi-faceted bilateral contacts which are facilitated by the use of L2.

## 4. Language competence, proficiency and language use

### 4.1. General remarks

Some observations made during several field trips to Vidunda Ward since February 2003 are summarized below:

The current linguistic situation in Vidunda Ward is the result of informal and formal factors that have shaped it. Among other things, the informal factors include seasonal work in other places, migration, sale of surplus products, visits to relatives, etc. People’s mobility consolidates their L2 competence and proficiency, since those who stay outside Vidunda Ward for a short or longer period are definitely exposed to a L2 speaking environment. Similarly, formal contacts, which were just referred to above, are also significant language-wise. A local government official who visits Vidunda Ward certainly uses L2, which is the official medium of communication in administration. L2 competence and proficiency are especially spread by the formal education system which operates several primary schools where L2 is the medium of instruction (MoI) and an important subject. In addition, it is widely spoken outside the classroom in the school yard. In other institutions of the area a similar L2 profile is displayed. Accordingly, most formal contacts are carried out in L2, thus turning the Ward into a bilingual environment.

It can be taken for granted that in the Vidunda Ward, L2 is known by everybody. Even senior Vidunda males and females were found proficient in Swahili. They informally learned L2 earlier from peers, while being outside the area as migrant worker and accompanying spouse, or were formally taught L2 in school. It may be that in more remote places up in the mountains few people do not master L2 well, but this would be an unconfirmed exception from the rule.

### 4.2. The young generation

It goes without saying that the UNESCO factors above provide a thought-provoking framework for evaluating language loss. This material invites comparison with my own long experience in the field of identifying and describing endangered L1s in Tanzania. It seems necessary to critically review these factors and to address more selectively the whole endangerment and maintenance issue. Elsewhere (Legère forthcoming) it is further argued that the UNESCO list needs prioritization in the sense that some factors have a greater impact on the linguistic situation than others. In particular, inter-generational L1 transmission and the language attitude problem need special attention and discussion.

Time and again research results on language endangerment have pointed out that language competence and proficiency in the young generation is particularly decisive for the future of a small language. This young generation also shapes language use. In the case of language choice its decision for or against L1 (often stimulated by external factors) could be a death blow or an important go ahead for a small L1. The vitality of Vidunda also heavily depends on a positive approach to L1 maintenance, as illustrated below.

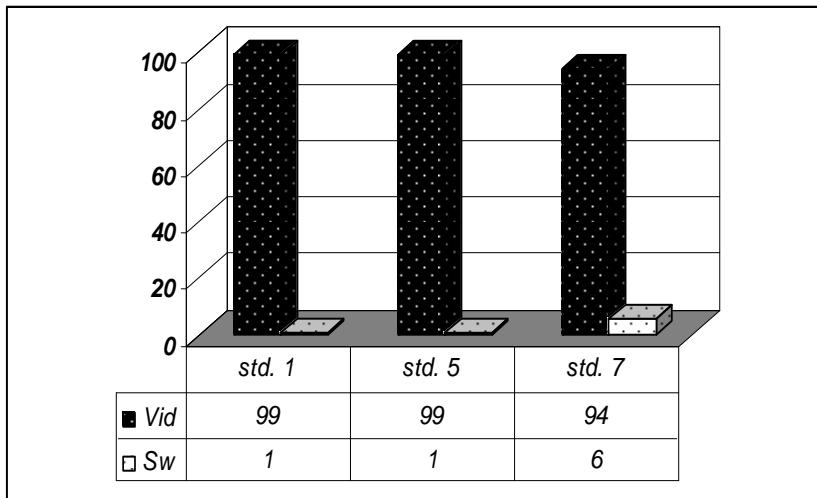
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<sup>14</sup> CCM stands for *Chama cha Mapinduzi* which has been the ruling party in Tanzania since 1977.

<sup>15</sup> The estate supports, among other things a temporary plant nursery in Vidunda.

Here is some evidence from a fact-finding survey that illustrates language competence, language use and language attitudes among Vidunda youth. This survey was carried out in the second half of 2003 in four schools of Vidunda Ward.<sup>16</sup> In those days 532 learners in grade/standard 1, standard 5 and standard 7 were interviewed. In upper grades a questionnaire was distributed.

With regard to language acquisition in early childhood all Vidunda interviewees stated that their mother tongue (MT) was Vidunda. This implies that the current parent generation mainly speaks to their children in L1 and that the latter enjoy a far-reaching exposure to L1 in the homestead. Children whose parents came from outside the area acquired Swahili as MT at home (or came with that MT from other places to Vidunda Ward). The MT background is clear from Figure 1.



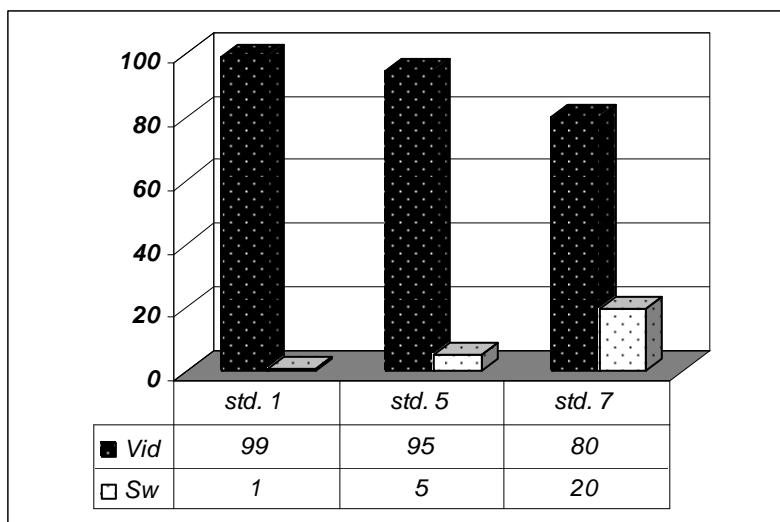
**Figure 1.** Mother tongue (in percent)

L1 continues to be very prominent in speaking to adult family members even when children grow older. Figure 2 below illustrates this language use, which is a sign of respect towards adults, and is also expected by adults.

Figure 2 reflects data and observations by the author and colleagues who studied language competence and use in Tanzania and elsewhere (see above and the bibliography). In fact, whenever L1 is losing ground in formal and informal domains and threatened, the family is the last bastion where L1 is still widely used. As soon as L1 is no longer widely spoken by the parent generation, children lack the opportunity to acquire this L1. This situation was observed among Bondei people in the hinterland of the Mainland coast in Tanga Region, where many children could not speak Bondei any more, but had mostly acquired L2. The former language was understood as the result of the close affinity L1 – L2 and a partial, irregular exposure to Bondei which was still used by grandparents and heard elsewhere, i.e. in traditional ceremonies, etc.<sup>17</sup>

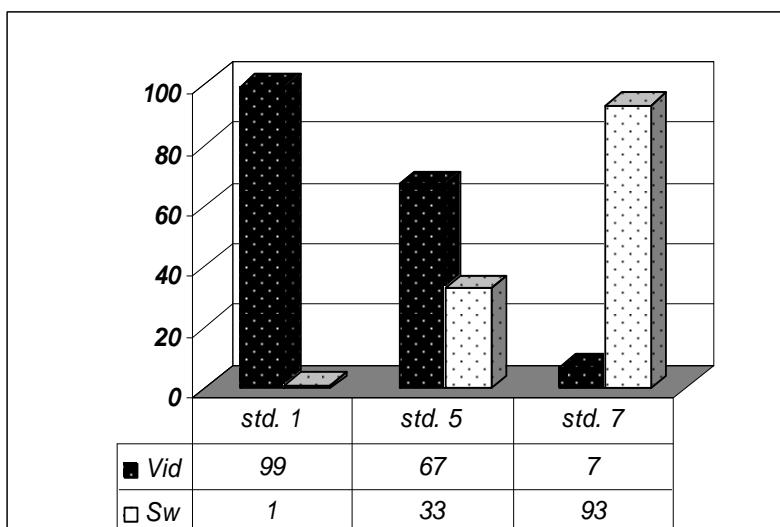
<sup>16</sup> The survey and its results were presented in detail in Legère (2006a).

<sup>17</sup> See Legère (1992a) for more information.



**Figure 2.** Language spoken with parents (in percent)

For comparison, Figure 3 gives a summary of which language is spoken with peers.



**Figure 3.** Language spoken with peers (in percent)

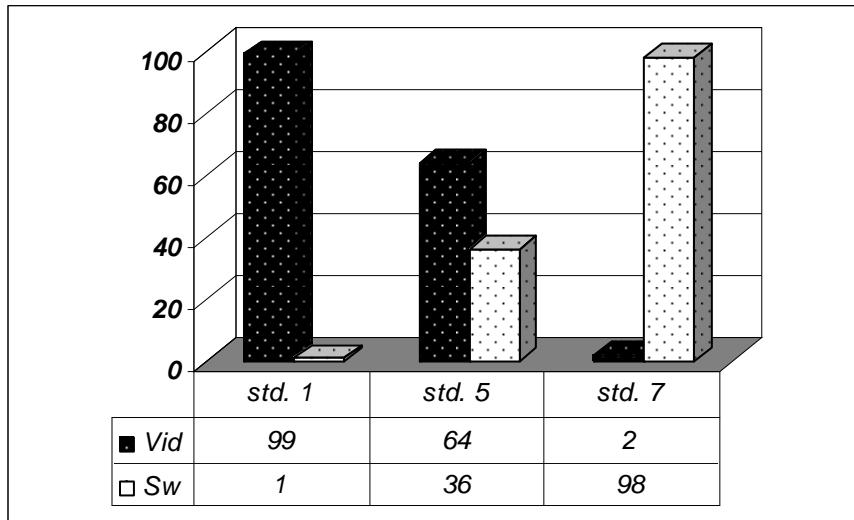
As portrayed in Figure 3 standard 1 children had no linguistic alternative, as they were almost all only L1 speaking. By standard 7 the situation has drastically changed: 93 percent declared that they communicate in L2 with peers, and only a small group claimed that they speak L1 to each other.

The major factor that shapes language use among the children is the complete L2 immersion in school as the result of the language policy implementation in primary education. In government schools L2 is the sole MoI throughout grade one to grade seven (when the primary cycle ends).<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, in the course of these seven years in school the language competence and proficiency of

<sup>18</sup> In private primary schools the MoI is to be English, but frequently a mixture of English and Swahili is used.

the learners gradually shifts from L1 to L2. In other words, while in the standard 1 learners often encounter problems in understanding the subject matter taught in L2, the situation subsequently changes in favor of Swahili to the detriment of L1. In this way, L2 becomes an important, compulsory element in the life of the young generation which is not negotiable, as the Tanzanian government does not formally tolerate any other Tanzanian language in education and in other formal domains<sup>19</sup> (although in practice in lower grades teachers who speak the same L1 as their learners facilitate the learning process by occasionally switching to this L1, which supports the grasp of the subject matter).<sup>20</sup>

The consistent exposure to L2 both in and outside the classroom, paired with the marginalization and even sometimes stigmatization of L1, results in a situation whereby in standard seven the data on language use are diametrically opposed to those of standard one. Factually 100 percent of standard seven learners have a solid command of L2, which becomes the preferred medium of communication with peers (Figure 3). L1 is still spoken at home with adults (Figure 2), but L1 proficiency and command has been stagnating, since the L2 focus in school keeps children away from consolidating L1 competence with regard to grammatical structures and vocabulary, which is at best sporadically expanded. It is probably also the desire of the young generation to become distinct language-wise from adults, which supports the wide-spread preference of L2. The learners' self-evaluation pertaining to the most frequently used language is illustrated in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Language most frequently spoken (in percent)

## 5. The extent of L1 endangerment

The facts summarized above are instrumental for predicting the future of Vidunda. In a rather bilingual environment, the future parent generation (the current primary school learners) displays L2 competence and proficiency as well as L2 use that, by and large, exceed that of L1. The far-going L2 exposure affects their L1 skills. Coupled with strong formal and moral L2 support, the chances of L1 to be transmitted in the future to another young generation diminish drastically. It is not likely that present-day children will reinforce their L1 proficiency after leaving the formal education system.

<sup>19</sup> Reiterated by Muhammed Seif Khatib (Tanzanian Minister of Information, Culture and Sports) at the launch of various LoT publications in Dar es Salaam, May 10, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Described inter alia by Wedin (2004).

Accordingly, the development observed and documented above is threatening. It already has a negative impact on the position of Vidunda in the sense that the total number of L1 speakers is decreasing. While these days inter-generational L1 transmission still takes place, L1 competence building is stagnating or eroding as the result of the L2 imposition in formal education. This substantial issue is not documented by, for example, the UNESCO expert team. In the case of Tanzania and beyond (for example Sudan<sup>21</sup>), UNESCO (2003b) ignores a factor that turns a whole generation away from L1 and into L2 speakers. In sum, the L2 impact in education is, to a large extent, responsible for language shift and L1 endangerment. The situation becomes further aggravating when other factors of the UNESCO Language Vitality List are evaluated.

It can be inferred from the foregoing discussion that the current Tanzanian language policy and its implementation in formal education is of central relevance for the L1's future. Hence, if this language policy were to stipulate that L1s should be used in school<sup>22</sup> in a sort of additive MoI approach, L1 learners would certainly become better skilled L1 speakers. This, in its turn, would enable them to use the L1 more widely. In this context, Namibia with its use of almost all L1s as MoI in lower primary grades has set a shining example of empowering languages. But this is rejected in Tanzania, where Minister Khatib made clear in May 2006 that there is no plan to assign L1s any formal role in primary education, contrary to what UNESCO (2003c) suggests.<sup>23</sup>

After many years of official negligence and even discrediting L1s (as they were and occasionally still are perceived as potential sources of tribalism), in 1997 the Tanzanian government at least officially recognized the existence of L1s. The Cultural Policy document (Tanzania 1997) pays attention to them using the term *lughu za jamii* ('languages of communities').<sup>24</sup> However, this policy lacks a clear vision, as it does not foresee any particular role for the L1s in Tanzanian society.<sup>25</sup> Nor does it hold out prospects of supporting follow-up steps due to lack of funding. Officials who compiled the document just recognize the complex linguistic situation. They do not offer a solution which is supposed to address the future of more than 120 L1s.

As indicated earlier, Vidunda is neither used in any formal domain nor is it expected to be assigned to a particular formal domain, as this would be against government policy. For similar reasons, there is no material for L1 classes or literacy courses. The L1 documentation available so far is in its infancy. The first publication at all in the history of Vidunda was launched in May 2006 (Legère & Mkwana'hembo 2006). This was a collection of orature samples in L1 plus L2 translation. The texts also serve as an internet source for computer-assisted L1 analysis such as establishing frequency and alphabetic lists, etc.<sup>26</sup> 500 copies of the publication will be distributed among L1 speakers in Vidunda Ward as an attempt to stop L1 erosion and to keep alive, or to revitalize, L1 competence particularly among primary school learners.

The examples above referred to the young generation whose language attitudes are shaped by language policy and the latter's implementation in school. This holds true also when language attitudes of the adults are evaluated. It is logical that they mainly use L2 in formal speech acts. Even if they would prefer L1, the lack of L1 vocabulary and appropriate terms that are needed to cope with new concepts and objects prevents them from using Vidunda in those domains. What matters is that, to an increasing extent even in informal conversation at the village level, L2 makes progress as a medium of communication. This does not imply that adults develop a negative attitude towards their L1. This gradual shift in use just reflects a situation where Vidunda people feel that their marginalized, disempowered L1 can no longer adequately serve their communicative requirements. As a consequence, language attitudes and L2 choice are forced upon Vidunda people by outside factors.

<sup>21</sup> Discussed in Idris (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> As suggested for example by Kahigi (2004).

<sup>23</sup> Further on, according to Minister Khatib, L1s will not be given a chance to be used in the media such as in radio broadcasts.

<sup>24</sup> This is an unfortunate term as even Swahili is, of course, spoken by a community.

<sup>25</sup> Except the acknowledgement of their existence, and as a possible source for enriching the Swahili lexical stock.

<sup>26</sup> See the Gothenburg African languages webpage under <http://www.african.gu.se/~daniel>.

Villagers are not at liberty to stem the tide by attempting to use L1 in domains where both external and linguistic reasons mitigate them against doing so.

## 6. Conclusion

Seen from the perspective of the UNESCO criteria, Vidunda falls into the category of highly endangered languages. However, taking into account own field work experience as well as the survey results from four schools of Vidunda Ward it is safe to conclude that the existence of this L1 is not immediately threatened. The ethno-linguistic homogeneity in Vidunda Ward still supports its use in informal domains. But Vidunda is in retreat, making the extended family and the homestead its place of protection and, hopefully, survival. In other domains no initiatives to maintain this L1 or to broaden its use are recorded.

The release of the Tanzanian Cultural Policy document, which merely recognizes the existence of languages other than Swahili is no cause of complacency. Like other African member states of UNESCO, Tanzania has approved fundamental documents on cultural and linguistic diversity, e.g. the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2 November 2001).<sup>27</sup> Tanzania also took part in the 1997 Harare Conference on Language Policies in Africa. This culminated in the Harare Declaration<sup>28</sup> and various supporting documents, like an action plan which urges African states to properly take into account their linguistic heritage. Nonetheless, de facto Tanzania does not much care about the country's L1s. Accordingly, it is just a matter of time when some very small languages such as the non-Bantu language Ngasa which is still spoken by twelve people (80 years and older) in the Kilimanjaro Region, become extinct. Vidunda is not an extinction candidate in the near future. Nonetheless, it is high time to focus on this L1 in linguistic research. From a linguist's perspective this L1 still offers a full range of authentic language data, some of which has been collected in the recent past. It is hoped that against this background comprehensive L1 documentation as well as linguistic reference material can be made available. Whether this is enough for keeping Vidunda alive is a question which cannot be answered yet.

## Acknowledgments

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<sup>27</sup> Referred to in UNESCO (2003a).

<sup>28</sup> Published in Legère & Fitchat (2002).

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