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Language vitality and standardisation perspectives:

A sociolinguistic survey of the Kwasio Language in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea

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Highlights
- Kwasio shows strong oral vitality but weak literacy.
- The community strongly stands for standardisation and revitalisation.
- Community ownership and initiative are vital for sustainable language revitalisation.

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Abstract

The present article examines the sociolinguistic situation of Kwasio, a Bantu A80 language spoken in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and, to a lesser extent, Gabon. Its focus lies on three major aspects: linguistic vitality, literacy competencies, and community attitudes toward orthographic standardisation. The study is based on a survey conducted between August 2024 and February 2025 among 81 participants, recruited through convenience sampling from community groups active on social networks and digital platforms. These groups collectively represent approximately 1,500 members of the Kwasio community in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and the diaspora. The results reveal that 76.5% of respondents report speaking Kwasio fluently, while 21.0% claim partial knowledge of the language. This distribution suggests that oral transmission remains relatively strong, although it is potentially weakened by the proportion of speakers with only limited proficiency. In contrast, a striking gap separates oral vitality from literacy skills. Only 32.1% of respondents are able to read Kwasio, and 35.8% can write it. These figures highlight the absence of a consolidated written tradition and the coexistence of heterogeneous graphic systems currently in use, often influenced by French or Spanish orthographies. On the question of orthographic standardisation, the community demonstrates remarkable consensus. An overwhelming 88.9% of respondents express support for the development of a unified writing system that would encompass the three main dialects: Mbvumbo, Mabi, and Bisio. This consensus is reinforced by data on mutual intelligibility, which show that the vast majority of respondents understand dialects other than their own: 79.4% for Mbvumbo, 74.6% for Mabi, and 76.7% for Bisio. Such figures indicate that despite phonological and lexical differences, the dialects share sufficient common ground to make a unified orthography both feasible and desirable. Pedagogical preferences reported by respondents a multimodal approach to learning. Community members favour a wide variety of tools and techniques, combining oral tradition with modern educational resources, digital platforms, and audiovisual materials. This openness to diverse methods reflects both the adaptability of the community and its willingness to integrate traditional and contemporary strategies for language promotion. Community engagement emerges as particularly strong. A significant majority, 79.0% of respondents, affirm their readiness to participate actively in revitalisation activities, while an additional 19.8% declare conditional availability. These figures demonstrate that motivation is not the primary obstacle to Kwasio's development. Instead, the main challenges lie in structural factors: the lack of resources, the absence of institutional coordination, and limited technical capacity. The study concludes that Kwasio is at a decisive stage in its evolution. Oral vitality persists, but the language remains excluded from formal domains due to the absence of a standardised orthography and sufficient written materials. Without intervention, this imbalance between oral strength and literacy weakness risks undermining long-term sustainability. The findings call for concerted action among all stakeholders—linguists, educators, institutions, and the community itself—to transform documented enthusiasm into concrete and durable revitalisation programmes. Ultimately, the research underscores that language planning is not solely the prerogative of states. Community ownership and initiative are vital for sustainable revitalisation.

Vitalité linguistique et perspectives de standardisation:

Une enquête sociolinguistique sur la langue kwasio au Cameroun et en Guinée Equatoriale

Résumé

Le présent article examine la situation sociolinguistique du kwasio, une langue du groupe bantu A80 parlée au Cameroun, en Guinée Equatoriale et dans une certaine mesure, au Gabon. Son intérêt porte sur trois aspects majeurs : la vitalité linguistique, les compétences en littératie et les attitudes communautaires à l'égard de sa standardisation orthographique. Cette étude est le fruit d'une enquête menée entre août 2024 et février 2025 auprès de 81 participants recrutés par convenance à travers des groupes communautaires dans les réseaux sociaux et les plateformes de médias sociaux représentant environ 1500 membres de la communauté kwasio au Cameroun, en Guinée équatoriale et dans la diaspora. Les résultats indiquent que 76,50% des répondants déclarent parler couramment le kwasio et 21,0% en avoir une connaissance partielle. Ce qui suggère une transmission orale encore relativement robuste, bien que potentiellement fragilisée par la proportion des locuteurs qui parlent peu la langue. En revanche, un écart saisissant sépare cette vitalité orale des compétences en littératie : seulement 32,10% des répondants sont capables de lire le kwasio et 35,80% de l'écrire, ce qui témoigne de l'absence d'une tradition écrite consolidée, et de l'hétérogénéité des systèmes graphiques en usage. Sur la question de la standardisation orthographique, la communauté manifeste un consensus remarquable : 88,90% des répondants se déclarent favorables au développement d'un système d'écriture unifié pour les trois principaux dialectes mbvumbo, mabi et bisio. Ce consensus est confirmé par les données de l'intelligibilité mutuelle qui montrent que la grande majorité des répondants comprend bien les dialectes autres que le leur : 79,40% pour les Mbvumbo, 74,60% pour les Mabi et 76,70% pour les Bisio. En matière de préférences pédagogiques, les répondants adoptent une approche multimodale qui combine une grande variété d'outils et techniques d'apprentissage. Enfin, l'engagement communautaire se révèle particulièrement élevé : 79,0% des répondants affirment être disposés à participer activement à des activités de revitalisations et 19,80% se déclarent potentiellement disponibles. L'enquête indique que les principaux obstacles au développement du kwasio ne sont pas d'ordre motivationnel mais tiennent plutôt au manque de ressources, à l'absence de coordination institutionnelle et de capacité technique. L'étude conclut que le kwasio se trouve à un stade décisif de son évolution : sa vitalité orale subsiste, mais la langue demeure exclue des domaines formels faute d'une orthographe standardisée et de matériaux écrits suffisants. L'étude appelle à des interventions concertées entre toutes les parties prenantes (Linguistes, éducateurs, institutions et communauté) pour convertir l'enthousiasme documenté en programme concret et durables de revitalisation. .

Mots clés: kwasio, vitalité linguistique, langue bantoue, standardisation, littératie, Cameroun, revitalisation.

Introduction

The Kwasio Language, classified Bantu A81 by Guthrie (1971) and Maho, (2009), is spoken in the Ocean Division within the South Region in the seaside resort of Kribi and in the Littoral Province of Equatorial Guinea. The language faces increasing pressure from dominant languages like French and Spanish (Bitjaa Kody, 2001; Yapko, 2010; Castillo Rodriguez, 2022) as well as from neighbouring languages from Ewondo-Fang group (Agyune

Ndone, 2005; Ollomo, 2013; A.K. Bouh Ma Sitna, 2016). Despite the significance of the language to the Kwasio people, it has received limited attention in terms of documentation, literacy development and standardisation efforts (Duke, 2006).

The sociolinguistic situation of minority languages in Cameroon is made of both challenges and opportunities for language conservation. With over 280 languages spoken across the country (Leclerc, 2016), smaller language speech communities often struggle to maintain transmission between generations. Usually, they face the influence of challenges such as urbanisation, formal education in foreign languages, economic and demographic pressure from major ethnic groups or languages. The kwasio speech community is no exception to these trends. Also, the extent of language vitality and community attitudes toward language maintenance remained largely undocumented before this study (Ngue Um, 2008).

In fact, one critical aspect of language maintenance in African context nowadays is the development of literacy and standardised orthographic systems (Robinson and Gadelii, 2003:3). Many African languages still maintain strong oral traditions while the absence of widely accepted writing systems and literacy materials limits their use in formal domains such as education, media, and administration. For the Kwasio language, this problem is worsen by the existence of Mbvumbo, Mabi and Bisio (and to some extent Shiwo) language varieties (Dieu and Renaud, 1983) which raises important questions about whether a unified orthographic system is possible and whether the speech community would support standardisation efforts.

Previous linguistic work on Kwasio has been limited with most descriptive work on the Kwasio language (fundamentally on the ŋbvùmbɔ̀ dialect). These studies are thesis, dissertations, books or unpublished draft projects of articles by missionaries, linguists, university students or organisations. The following are particularly concerned: Skolaster (1910), Woungly-Massaga (1971), Lemb (1974; 1976), Dieu (1976), Yemmene (2004), Ngue Um (2002; 2008), Bouh Ma Sitna C. L. (2006), Blench and Martin (2010), (Duke, 2006; 2009; 2011), Cheucle (2012), CIED LAK-TRAB and SIL Cameroon (2024). However, comprehensive sociolinguistic surveys examining speaker attitudes, literacy levels and language use patterns have been lacking. Understanding these dimensions is essential for effective language planning and for designing interventions that align with community needs and preferences.

This study addresses these gaps through a comprehensive sociolinguistic survey of the Kwasio speech community. The research aims to assess the current level of language vitality through self-reported speaking proficiency and frequency of use. Also, it seeks to evaluate literacy levels in Kwasio, including reading and writing abilities, document dialectal variation and mutual intelligibility among Mbvumbo, Mabi, and Bisio speakers, investigate community attitudes toward developing a unified orthographic system, identify preferred pedagogical approaches and media for language promotion, and measure community willingness to participate in language revitalisation activities.

The findings in this research provide a valuable baseline data for language planning initiatives. They offer insights to the feasibility of developing standardised educational material for Kwasio. By emphasising community perspectives and documenting current

language practices, this study contributes to the broader discourse on minority language maintenance in multilingual contexts. As a contribution from a native researcher committed to the maintenance and development of his own language within a community-based context of cultural awakening and linguistic consciousness, this work embodies the principle that language planning is not the exclusive domain of States. Individuals and communities can actively participate in language documentation and planning too (Boyer, 2010).

1. Methods

This study falls within the sociolinguistic research tradition of ethnographic approach which "is based on participant observation and a researcher's long-term involvement in community" (Bijeikiene and Tamosiunaité, 2013:11). Ethnographic research seeks "to discover how people use language, what they believe about language, and why they believe so" (Heller, 2008:250 cited in Bijeikiene and Tamosiunaité, 2013:12). In line with this perspective, the present study adopts a mixed-method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative methods are often associated with questionnaires and statistical analysis whereas qualitative approaches are related to interviews, observation, and focus group. However, this study does not adhere to such a rigid dichotomy. Instead, it employs a questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended questions in order to generate numerical data for statistical analysis while capturing participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward phenomena under investigation.

This section presents the methodology adopted to investigate the sociolinguistic situation of the Kwasio speech community. It describes the research design and target population, the sampling and recruitment procedures, the data collection instrument, the analytical approach, and the ethical considerations that guided the study. .

1.1. Study Design and Population

This sociolinguistic survey was conducted between August 2024 and February 2025 among members of the Kwasio speech community in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. The study employed a "Google forms" structured questionnaire administered in both French and Spanish to gather the linguistic preferences of respondents from the different countries. The target population consisted of individuals who identified themselves as members of the Kwasio ethnic community, regardless of their current proficiency in the language.

1.2. Sampling and Recruitment

A convenience sampling strategy was adopted for this study. Participants were recruited through community networks and social media platforms. These included: Tam-Tam d'Afrique (a society of Mbvumbo and Mabi academics), Nlar Mbvumbo officiel (a Mbvumbo cultural association), Nous Mbvumbo du monde entier (another Mbvumbo cultural association), AJAM (the Mabi Youth Association), and Nlar Mintima (a Bisio community group). Across these platforms, which collectively represented approximately 1,500 members, 81 participants completed the questionnaire.

1.3. Data Collection Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of 29 questions (a copy is attached as appendix), organised into six thematic sections: demographic information (including age, gender, education level, and place of residence); Language proficiency and use patterns (speaking ability, dialect affiliation, frequency of use, and contexts of use); Literacy skills (reading and writing abilities, writing systems used, and difficulties experienced); Attitudes toward orthographic standardisation (support for a unified writing system and justifications); Pedagogical preferences (preferred learning materials, educational programmes, and promotional media); and community engagement (willingness to participate in revitalisation activities and suggestions for standardisation efforts).

The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions with predetermined response categories and open-ended questions allowing respondents to provide details, explanations and suggestions. Questions regarding dialectal comprehension employed a Likert-type scale to assess varying levels of mutual intelligibility among the three main dialect groups. Several questions permitted multiple responses particularly those addressing contexts of language use, preferred pedagogical materials, and media for language promotion.

1.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages. Responses provided in both French and Spanish were consolidated into unified categories to enable comprehensive analysis. For instance, affirmative responses like “Oui” in French and “Si” in Spanish were combined, as were responses indicating partial proficiency like “Un peu” in French and “Un poco” in Spanish. This bilingual consolidation approach aimed to ensure that language of response did not hinder underlying patterns in the data.

Open-ended responses were examined for recurring themes and categorised according to common patterns. For questions allowing multiple responses such as preferred pedagogical materials or media for language promotion, individual mentions were counted rather than respondent-level frequencies, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of community preferences.

1.5. Ethical Considerations

The survey was conducted with respect for research ethics and participant privacy. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to skip questions they preferred not to answer. Confidentiality of individual responses was preserved and participants were informed of the right to withdraw from the study at any time. No personally identifiable information beyond broad demographic categories was collected, and data were gathered for analysis and reporting purposes.

2. The Kwasio People

Before delving into the core of the subject, it is important to know who the Kwasio are. The speakers of this linguistic community are dispersed across three Central African countries: Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.

2.1. The Mbvumbo and Mabi in Cameroon

In Cameroon, the Mbvumbo and Mabi varieties are found in the Ocean Division (South Region). The Mabi variety is spoken along the Atlantic coast, in the town of Kribi and its

surrounding villages. The Mabi populations are settled since 1628 in this area between the Lokoundjé River in the north and the Ntem River in the south, at the border with Equatorial Guinea (A.K. Bouh Ma Sitna, 2016:70). The Mabi, like their Mbvumbo brothers, were shaped by the adversity of migrations and adapted to various activities such as fishing, farming, and handicrafts (Mboum, 2023). Estimates of their numbers vary considerably depending on the source, but Wikipedia modestly places this population at 25,000 inhabitants. The rapid urban growth of Kribi since the early 2000s has subjected the indigenous Mabi, as well as their neighbours the Batanga and Iyasa, to land pressure linked to the city's economic development and the arrival of non-native populations from other regions of the country seeking financial stability. That situation harmfully endangers their language, their culture and even their existence in their natural living place.

The Mbvumbo speakers, for their part, occupy the inland portion of the division. From Kribi to Lolodorf via Bipindi, they are spread out along roughly 120 km of road within the dense equatorial forest. In the interior, the Mbvumbo are in contact with Fang, Basaa, Bulu, and Bagyeli (Pygmy) populations. In Lolodorf, they border the Basaa, Ewondo, and Bulu communities, with whom they now share peaceful coexistence after the belligerent episodes that marked the history of their migrations (A.K. Bouh Ma Sitna, 2016: 74). The Mbvumbo are traditionally hunters. Both men and women also practice fishing and agriculture. In the past, the Mbvumbo and Mabi traded with Europeans settled on the coast. Their enrichment through trade attracted the envy of the Bulu and Ntumu, who repeatedly attacked their properties (A.K. Bouh Ma Sitna, 2016: 81). The World Sociological Atlas estimates the total number of Kwasio (Ngumba) at 26,000 people, while Omniglot (2025) evaluates the entire Kwasio community at around 70,000 speakers.

2.2. The Bisio in Equatorial Guinea

In Equatorial Guinea, the Bisio reside mainly in the Littoral Province. They occupy the northwestern part of the country and share their living space along the Bata coast with the Fang, Okak, Ntumu, Balengue, and Bapuku ethnic groups. They are also neighbours of the Bubi, Anobones, and Benga groups from the insular part of the country. To the northeast, the Nzaman are their immediate neighbours. The Bisio live from petty trade, agriculture, and mainly fishing, hence the nickname "playeros" commonly attributed to them in the Equatoguinean context. Their population is estimated at about 10,000 people (Wikipedia). This number is smaller compared to the large neighboring ethnic groups, such as the Fang (around 300,000 speakers in Equatorial Guinea) and the Bubi (around 40,000). Today, most Bisio villages are concentrated around the provincial capital, Bata, and in the Mbini district (Wul in Bisio). The political rise of the Fang after independence, the migration of the active Bisio population to the capital Malabo in search of economic and financial stability, and the youth displacement in search of better education have led to a massive exodus of this population to Malabo. A situation that has profoundly destabilised the original social structure of the Bisio.

2.3. The Shiwo in Gabon

In Gabon, the Makina or Shiwo, recognised as a separate language in Maho's classification (2009), is identified alongside Bisio as a varieties of Kwasio beyond Cameroonian borders by M. Dieu and P. Renaud (1983: 103). Their sociolinguistic approach

to Kwasio identity is also shared by the Kwasio community itself. The Shiwo are located in the provinces of "Moyen-Ogooué" and "Ogooué-Ivindo in Gabon." The Shiwo language counts between 1,000 and 5,000 speakers. Traditionally, the Shiwo practice agriculture, hunting, and fishing, the latter being carried out by both men and women. The Makina of Gabon are influenced by the major linguistic groups present: Fang, Kota, and Saké, as well as the expansion of French. This situation has greatly contributed to the disappearance of this group in the Woleu-Ntem province where it was once reported, and to the assimilation of part of its speakers into the so-called "Fang-Meke dialect," a variety of the Fang language.

Dispersion across borders, exposure to dominant languages, and mounting sociopolitical pressures have together weakened the cohesion of the Kwasio community and weakened the vitality of its language. A clear understanding of this geographical and demographic configuration is essential foundation for any further reflection on the maintenance, standardisation, and revitalisation of Kwasio.

3. Results

This section presents the results of the sociolinguistic survey according to the thematic content analysis approach. The approach operates by finding and grouping meaningful parts of the text into themes, so that recurring patterns can be highlighted and explained in a clearer way (Paillé and Muchielli, 2008). Thus, the results in this section are organised thematically, covering the demographic profile of the respondents, patterns of language proficiency and use, literacy skills in Kwasio, community attitudes toward orthographic standardisation, pedagogical and promotional preferences, and overall willingness to engage in language revitalisation activities.

3.1. Who Took Part in the Survey

Eighty-one respondents from different varieties of the kwasio speech community participated in the survey. Most of them, 58 that is to say 71.6% were identified as male while 21 (26.0%) were female. That might reflect either characteristics of the community population or difference of response rates by gender. The age distribution showed a predominance of middle-aged respondents, with the largest group (33.3%) falling within 36-45 years age range, followed by those aged 46-55 years (27.2%). Younger respondents aged 19-35, represented 19.8% of the sample, while those over 55 years accounted for 17.3%. This age distribution suggests that the survey captured perspectives from individuals who are likely to play key roles in intergenerational language transmission.

Education levels were pretty high: nearly three-quarters (74.1%) reported they had achieved higher education levels. Another 23.4% had completed secondary education and only 1.2% had no formal education achievement. This might reflect characteristics of individuals recruited through social media and community network, which tend to be more educated people. As for their living place, 40.7% were living in urban areas, 35.8% in peri-urban and 23.5% in rural zones. That repartition gave an interesting view from different sociolinguistic contexts where language maintenance dynamics may greatly differ.

3.2. How Well People Speak the Language and When They Use It

When asked about their speaking ability, 97.5% said they could speak Kwasio. 76.5% claimed full fluency ("Yes"), 21% reported partial fluency ("A little"), and only 2.5%

admitted they couldn't speak it at all. These figures show reasonable maintenance of oral skills, but also indicate that fluency might be falling especially among the youth or people living in cities.

Looking at how often people actually use Kwasio, 47.5% said they speak it "Always" in daily life, and 39.3% said "Often." Another 14.8% use it "Sometimes," and 6.6% only "Rarely." 1.6% of those who affirmed that they could speak the language said they never used it. This shows that Kwasio is still actively used in daily communication by an important majority of speakers within the community (93%). It is not just a passive heritage language struggling for preservation.

Respondents identified themselves with three major dialects. Among the 81 participants of the survey, the Mbvumbo respondents represented 41 people (51%), the Mabi were 14 (17%), and the Bisio 26 (32%). Many reported familiarity across boundaries with the Shiwo dialect in Gabon. Though we could find an informant native speaker of that language, we couldn't get in touch with an acceptable group of participants for the investigation.

Respondents showed awareness of the existence of dialect varieties and recognised mutual intelligibility between the dialects investigated. For Mbvumbo, 79.4% respondents reported that they understood other dialects "well" or "very well", and 20.6% found them difficult or incomprehensible. 74.6% of Mabi respondents said they understood other dialects "well" or "very well." 25.4% said they experienced difficulties. Bisio had similar results: 76.7% said they understood "well" or "very well." 18.3% had difficulties or could not understand other dialects at all, while 5.0% said they did not know. Globally, about 76.9% of community members find the three main dialects mutually intelligible. Which is a solid foundation for the development of a common written standard.

Major differences perceived between the various dialects include: phonetic, morphological and lexical differences. The table below provides consonant sound variations pointed out by participants.

Table1: Consonant sound variations in Kwasio dialects

Sound Variation	**Mbvumbo**	**Mabi**	**Bisio**	**Meaning**
[s] ~ [ʃ]	"sio" [sʲó] "sil" [sîl] "asieh nga" [asíœʕŋgâ]	"shio" [ʃʲó] "Shili"[ʃílì] "Ashiah nga" [[aʃíaʕ ŋgâ]	"sio" [sʲó] / "shio" [ʃʲó] "sil" [sîl] "ashigo nga" [aʃíɣó ŋgâ]	Elephant tusk To finish "Hello!" 3rd p.
[z] ~ [ʒ]	"nzi" [nzi] "manzwel" [mànzʷêl] "nzieh" [nzíœʕ]	"nji" [nʒì] "manjwoli" [manʒʷólì] "njiah" [nʒìaʕ]	"nzi" [nzi] "manjwol" [manʒʷôl] "njieh [njiœʕ]	"to come" "tears" "Come!"
[ts] ~ [ʧ]	"tsiga" [tsìɣà] "tsieh" [tsiœʕ]	"tshiga" [tʃìɣà] "tshiah" [tʃʲàʕ]	"tsiga" [tsìɣà] "tchieh" [tʃʲœʕ]	"tale" "life"
[dz] ~[ʤ]	"dzina" [dzínà] "dzieh" [dzʲœʕ]	"djina" [dʒínà] "djiah" [dʒʲăʕ]	"dzina" [dzínà] "djieh" [dʒʲœʕ]	"name" "forest, bush"

Respondents also noted the use of the sound combinations [œʕ] and [aʕ]. While the [œʕ] seems to have disappeared in the Mabi dialect, being systematically replaced by [aʕ], both forms are still used in Mbvumbo and Bisio in contexts that need to be clarified through a phonological study.

Participants emphasised that sounds like [nd^{h}] in “ndtuah” [nd^{hw}âʕ] (mango), [mb^{h}] in “mbpile” [mb^{h}ile] (sparrow hawk), [ŋgb] in “ngbang” [ŋgbaŋ] (crow) , [bv] in “bvu” [bvu] (fire), [pf] in “pfuma” [pfúmá] (wealth), [œ] in “beh” [bœʕ] (hoe) and [ɥ] in “ywah” [ɥaʕ] (chimpanzee) were typical sounds of the kwasio language.

From the words provided by participants we identified some key linguistic phenomena across the three dialects which are summarised in the table below.

Table2: Some key linguistic phenomena across the dialects of Kwasio

Gloss	**Mabi**	**Mbvumbo**	**Bisio**	**Key Phenomena**
To know Language	“sangele” “kyeli”	“sang’le” “Kyel”	“Song’le” “kyel”	Internal/end Vowel loss
To sell	“gyagu”	“gyoksi”	-----	Shared root gya-; divergent extension
Here	“ma”	“wa”	“ma”	Initial consonant shift
To know Money Clan Morning	“sangele” “dolo” “kah” “mana”	“limbo” “mon’” “kah” “mana”	------ “mbvum” “mia”	Lexical replacement

The corpus provides an overview of some key linguistic phenomena identified in participant responses. Most common phenomena include phonological alternation, morphological reduction and lexical divergence. Each language shows originality: Mabi behaves as the most conservative, Mbvumbo exhibits economical use of the language, and Bisio innovates with original words. A dialectological study would help deepen the investigation.

3.3. Reading and Writing in Kwasio

Kwasio literacy contrasts with oral proficiency. According to the survey, only 32.1% said they could read the language, and 35.8% acknowledged they could write it. In other words, while oral transmission is still strong, reading and writing skills are clearly limited across the community.

Respondents who reported writing ability mentioned various orthographic systems with responses indicating considerable diversity and lack of standardisation. Out of 31 respondents who answered this question, the most common systems were Latin script (4 people, 12.9%), French orthography (4people, 12.9%), and “no particular system at all” (4people, 12.9%). Three people (9.7%) mentioned Spanish orthography, while AGLC system, SIL conventions, Mabi-based writing, Bisio-based writing, a personal system, and Kwasio Hymns system were

each mentioned by one respondent (3.2% each). One person mentioned a newly developed system. Another pointed out the German alphabet. Some talked about systems created by missionaries, while others described personal or family methods for writing Kwasio sounds. This confusing situation stresses the need for standardisation efforts in writing Kwasio to gain wider functionality. The table below, extracted from the student's handout of the Foundation Course – "Premier pas à l'écriture" organised by SIL-Cameroon from August 12 to 23, 2002, clearly illustrates the orthographic heterogeneity within the Kwasio speech community.

Table3: An Overview of the history of Kwasio orthography (SIL-Cameroon, 2002.)

L'histoire de l'écriture en langue Kwasio

	Skolaster (1910)[1] :	Ecole Kwasio (1945) :	EPA Hymn (dates ?)[2] :	UBS (1968) :	Bouh (1980 ff)[3] :	Woungley (1990 ff)[4] :	Bier Mam (1970 ff) :	Boutouri (1990 ff) :	Bokally (2003)[5] :	Mimpfoundi :
Dialects	Mabi ?	Mabi	mabi ?	mix	mix	mvoumbo	mv	mv	mv	mvoumbo
Tone	yes	over, under, grave	no	yes	bóàngaè ñ bìūníúy è	no	yes	yes	no	
V length	ō long, ‹ short	ō, oh, eh, iy	oh, ‘	ō, oh, iy	oo, iy,	oo or oh	ō/ô	ö or oh	-h,	
V ATR	ê=e ô=o	no	no	e, o	e, Ɛ o, ɔ	no	yes	é=e	e, o	
Pharyngeal	?	ō, er	-r	ō, er, eh	ə	ah, oeh, eh, uh	ô/ê	ēr	ō	
Aspiration	no	mbp/ndt/ ?	mbp/ndt/ ?	mbp/ndt/nĝ	mbp/ndt/ ?	mbp/ndt/ ?	mbp/ndt	mbp/ndt	mbp/ndt/ ?	
Contractions	no	no	yes ?	yes			yes		yes	
/ɲ/	ny	bar over or ñ	ny or ni-	ṅ	ny	ny	bar over or ñ	ny or	ñ	
/-ŋ/	ñ	ng or n [annot. manuscrite]	ng	n	ñ	ng	ng	ñ or n circumflex	ng	
h	?	ŋ-? [manuscrit]	?	?	ḥ-	h-	?		?	

Notes :
1. Skolaster manuscripts destroyed by water at Kribi parish in 1980's. Only Grammar survives.
2. Earliest by Ngally 1940's, much revised. Perhaps earlier one from Kribi ?
3. Need to interview Bouh and son. Scan some examples.
4. Lucette Woungley's Psalms & hymnbook. History needed.
5. Interview needed. Get contact info from Pastor Nzie.

Respondent highlighted several difficulties in reading and writing Kwasio. The difficulties included tone representations, lack of a standard spelling system, scarcity of written material for reference and practice, lack of formal instructions for Kwasio literacy, and troubles to represent phonemes that do not have a clear equivalent in French or Spanish orthographies. Challenges acknowledged were both technical and practical. They concerned educational infrastructure and resources.

3.4. Community attitude towards standardisation

Community attitudes to the development of a common orthography for the three major dialects were very positive. 88.9% of respondents agreed with the development of a single "Mbvumbo-Mabi-Bisio" writing system, while 9.9% disagreed. This strong consensus shows that the community can see potential benefits of a unified orthography.

When asked why they supported standardisation, participants pointed out a number of positive impacts. They said language learning and transmission to younger generation would be easier; Standardisation would boost language prestige and legitimacy, allow the same educational material to be used across the whole Kwasio speaking area, foster unity and shared identity among the Kwasio speakers, and widen the range of contexts to domains like media, education administration and public places. A small minority opposed the idea. They either worried about losing dialect distinctiveness or were sceptical about possible consensus across dialect groups. .

As for what kind of characters they preferred for writing Kwasio, there was a clear preference for familiar scripts. Latin script was overwhelmingly the preferred option, chosen by 70 respondent (86.4%). The CIED/LAK-TRAD, SIL system, a simplified system and a typical Kwasio alphabet were each preferred by 2 respondents (2.5% each). 2 other respondents (2.5%) had no preference. 3 of the respondents (3.7%) did not respond to this question. Many participants in favour of a Latin script also indicated that they support diacritical marks to show tone and phonetic distinctions. A few suggested borrowing elements from existing Cameroonian language orthographies, or creating entirely new symbols for sounds unique to Kwasio. People frequently said that whatever system was adopted should be "simple" and "easy to learn", especially for those already literate in French or Spanish. .

On the tone-marking question, participants stressed the need for marking tone to avoid confusion. They argued that tones carried meaning in Kwasio. Ignoring them could lead to ambiguity and make words difficult to understand.

3.5. Teaching Preferences and Techniques

People proposed multiple options for learning materials. The most common choices included textbooks and grammar guides, audio recordings and podcasts, mobile apps and digital platforms, video lessons and tutorials, and illustrated children's books and stories. This multimodal preference means that good language education programmes should offer a variety of resources to suit different learning styles and age groups.

Participants also expressed interest in different types of educational programmes such as formal school-based instruction in Kwasio, community-based adult education classes, family-centred language programmes that include multiple generations, online courses and distance learning opportunities, immersion programmes or language camps for children. The variety of programmes proposed reflects the different contexts in which language learning may take place and the need for flexible, accessible educational opportunities.

For media that can promote Kwasio, respondents named several channels with potential impact including radio programmes in Kwasio, social media content and online communities, TV shows and videos, written publications like newspapers and magazines, cultural events and Festivals featuring the language, religious services and literature in Kwasio. These recommendations provide a way to raise the language profile of Kwasio in a number of areas in public life.

3.6. Community Engagement and Willingness to get involved

The community expressed its willingness to actively get involved in the language revitalisation process. When asked if they would participate in activities to promote Kwasio, 79.0% answered "Yes" and 19.8% "Maybe". Only a small faction said they did not want to participate. The large number of "Yes" represents a social capital that can be mobilised for language planning.

Open-ended suggestions for standardisation and dissemination strategies unveiled practical visions from community members. Frequently mentioned recommendations included: forming a committee of speakers from all dialects to oversee standardisation, engaging linguist and educators in creating the orthographic system, holding workshops and consultations to gain community support, systematically developing literacy materials and

curricula after standardisation, using technology and social media for dissemination, incorporating Kwasio into school curricula in areas where it is spoken, and creating economic incentives or cultural prestige linked to Kwasio proficiency. These recommendations show the complexity of language planning and the importance of connecting technical linguistic work with community involvement and institutional support.

4. Discussion

This section interprets the findings in the study, limitations and considers issues like minority language maintenance, orthographic standardisation and community-based language planning. The discussion analyses key patterns emerging from the data, then explores their implications for language planning practices, addresses challenges related to dialectal variation, acknowledges the study limitations, and considers broader lessons applicable to minority language communities across multilingual Africa.

4.1. Interpretation of Findings

This study provides field evidence of the current sociolinguistic situation of Kwasio. The findings that 76.5% of respondents can speak Kwasio suggests that oral transmission remains relatively strong as compared to many minority languages in similar contexts. Nevertheless, this positive indicator must be interpreted with other figures. The 21.0% respondents reporting partial proficiency may indicate incomplete acquisition by younger speakers or language regression among speakers with few opportunities to use the language on a regular basis. Data regarding frequency of use show that while most speakers use Kwasio regularly, a remarkable minority use it only occasionally. A situation which may indicate early stages of language shift.

The most striking finding of this study concerns the huge gap skills in speaking (76.5% of respondent) and skills in reading (32.1%) and writing (35.8%). This is common pattern in African languages with limited written traditions, arising from the historical dominance of oral traditions. This literacy gap presents serious challenges for the long-term sustainability of the language in a context where literacy is becoming more and more important for language prestige, educational inclusion and functional expansion. Without widespread literacy and associated materials, Kwasio risks exclusion from formal domains such as education, administration and media, limiting its intergenerational potential.

Community support for orthographic standardisation, strong at 88.9%, creates favourable conditions for language planning. This level of consensus challenges assumptions that diversity necessarily obstructs standardisation. The Kwasio community appears to recognise that a unified orthography, despite dialectal variation, offers advantages compared to maintaining separate systems. This pragmatic position provides a comprehensive foundation for inclusive standardisation efforts involving representatives from all dialect groups.

The high educational level of respondents (74.1%) produces mixed implications. Educated individuals possess metalinguistic knowledge, transferable literacy skills, and potential capacity to contribute to language documentation and teaching. Equally, higher education often correlates with urban residence, dominant language in professional contexts, and possible language shift toward widely used languages. The fact that many highly

educated respondents maintain Kwasio speaking ability suggests that education does not always induce language abandonment, but that interventions are needed to ensure that community members support rather than hinder language maintenance.

The strong willingness to participate in revitalisation activities (79.0% convinced, 19.8% potential) indicates significant social capital available for mobilisation. This finding suggests that barriers to language maintenance may originate less from community attitudes than from resource limitations, lack of institutional support and coordinated initiatives. The challenge for the Kwasio is therefore to transform latent motivation into concrete engagement to provide sustainable programmes and accessible materials.

4.2. Implications for Language Planning

Several implications arise for language planning in the Kwasio community. First of all, creating a standardised orthography should sound as the foundation work. The community support for this initiative is strong and can create good conditions for a collaborative process involving representatives from all the stakeholders. Linguists with expertise in Bantu phonology and orthography design, educators who can make the system easily learnable and teachable, and community elders who protect cultural authenticity etc.

Second, the development of literacy must either accompany or immediately follow orthographic standardisation. The current imbalance between literacy and oral proficiency poses a critical problem. Literacy programmes should target multiple demographic groups such as adults who speak but cannot read or write Kwasio, youth with partial proficiency who need literacy for reinforcement, and children programmes accessible through family or community education. Preferences for divers resources including textbooks, audio materials, and digital applications imply that programmes should adopt multimodal approaches rather than relying solely on conventional classroom methods.

Third, language planning initiatives should take advantage of the high level of education and access to technology among members of the community. The proliferation of mobile devices such as mobile applications for language learning, online dictionaries and language documents, social media content and distance education platforms could effectively reach dispersed speakers, particularly urban migrants and diaspora population who engage digitally.

Fourth, there is a need to extend the functional domains of Kwasio beyond purely domestic and informal contexts. This could include. Advocating for kwasio inclusion in local education either as a subject or medium of instruction, producing media content in kwasio, translating religious materials and conducting services in the language, developing terminology for contemporary concepts, and encouraging use within community administration and public places. Expanding functional domains can enhance language prestige and provide incentives for language maintenance and development.

Fifth, language planning must be participatory and actively involve community members in all stages. The high willingness to participate suggests that top-down initiatives are less likely to succeed than community-empowering ones that involve community members as collaborators in developing language resources and activities. The establishment of community language committees, training of local teachers and literacy facilitators,

engaging youth in the development of digital content and recognising community contributions to language maintenance may help support long-term engagement.

4.3. Dialectal variation and standardisation challenges

While the study confirms strong support for orthographic standardisation, the practical challenges of achieving consensus across dialect groups should not be underestimated. According to the respondents, the dialectal variation between the Mbvumbo – Mabi – Bisio seems to encompass phonological, lexical and potentially grammatical differences. The need for a writing system that adequately represents all three dialects, while maintaining simplicity for learners requires detailed linguistic analysis and negotiation.

Mutual intelligibility among the dialects proved to be encouraging for standardisation efforts. It suggests that written materials in a standardised form would be comprehensible to speakers of all varieties with minimal adaptation. Nevertheless, this standardisation process must be undertaken cautiously from a sociolinguistic standpoint because it may lead to the marginalisation of particular dialect groups or create linguistic hierarchies that might undermine the unity of the community.

4.4. Limitations and Directions for Further Research Studies

The present study provides useful baseline data for the Kwasio sociolinguistic situation, but it has some limitations which point directions to further research. The convenience sampling, though diverse in some respects, may not fully represent the entire Kwasio-speaking community. People in rural areas, with low education and low access to technology may not be suitably represented. Using stratified random sampling or targeted recruitment of underrepresented groups in future studies would enhance representativeness. Relying on self-reported proficiency and literacy introduces potential bias. Objective measures of language skills such as structured proficiency interviews or literacy tests would be more accurate measures for measuring actual abilities. Further observational research on language use in natural settings could collaborate or challenge self-reported frequency data.

4.5. Broader Implications for Minority Language Maintenance

Beyond its specific findings on Kwasio, this study extends broader understandings of minority language maintenance in multilingual African contexts. Fairly strong oral transmission, weak literacy and limited expansion of functional domains is common and is a widespread pattern across many African minority languages. This study shows that language vitality cannot be measured by speaker numbers or even daily usage patterns alone. The capacity to transmit literacy and to expand language use into formal domains are equally critical dimensions of long-term sustainability.

The significant community support for standardisation despite dialectal diversity contests views that emphasize internal divisions as obstacles to language planning in African contexts. The present study show that when communities perceive clear benefits to standardisation and are treated as partners rather than passive subjects, they may be quite willing to negotiate dialectal differences in a pragmatic way.

Finally, the strong desire to participate in revitalisation activities highlights the relevance of considering endangered language communities as active participants who have the capacity to shape their own linguistic futures.

Conclusion

The sociolinguistic survey of the Kwasio speech community in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea studies the Kwasio language at a critical point of its evolution. With 76.5% of respondents reporting speaking ability and 93% using the language actively, Kwasio exhibits a base of oral transmission that many endangered languages lack. Nonetheless, the significant literacy gap (only one-third of respondents are able to read or write the language) poses a serious risk of sustainability in a context where literacy mediates access to education, media and social participation.

The strong consensus in favour of orthographic standardisation (88.9%) and the high willingness to engage in revitalisation activities (79.9%) indicate that challenges are more related to resources, coordination and technical capacity than to community attitudes. With appropriate support and collaborative planning, the existing enthusiasm could be directed toward developing literacy materials, expanding functional domains, and creating educational opportunities across generations.

Priorities identified include establishing a standardised orthography through inclusive processes, developing literacy programmes designed to various age groups and proficiency levels, leveraging digital technologies to produce learning resources and foster online communities, promoting Kwasio usage in formal domains such as education, media and in public places, and forming sustainable community language committees and teaching networks. Achieving these goals require partnerships among community members, linguists, educators, organisations and governments.

This study contributes to documentation of language vitality patterns in Bantu languages of Central Africa. It offers a methodological approach centred on community perspectives and priorities. The findings demonstrate that even languages with small speaker populations and limited institutional support can maintain vitality when communities remain committed to intergenerational transmission and willing to plan for the future of the language.

The future of Kwasio depend not only on external interventions but also on actions, commitment and creativity of its speakers. Such commitment exists in substantial measures, as this research records. The challenge now is to transform motivation into action, so that the next generation of Kwasio inherits not only oral skills, but also literacy, cultural pride and opportunities to use the language across all domains. With concerted efforts, well-planned strategy and sufficient resources, Kwasio will transition from an orally transmitted language to a functional language of communication that would be read and written by generations to come.

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APPENDIX

Sociolinguistic Questionnaire on the Kwasio Language

Language Vitality and Standardization Perspectives:
A Sociolinguistic Survey of the Kwasio Language in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea

Dear participant,

This questionnaire is part of a research project on the revitalization and graphic standardization of Kwasio, a Bantu language (A.80) spoken across Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. Your responses will help us understand current linguistic practices within the community and identify your needs and expectations regarding the development of a unified writing system. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. We thank you for the time and care you devote to your answers.

Section I — Sociodemographic Profile

Q1. Gender
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Q2. Age range
- ☐ 19–25 years
- ☐ 26–35 years
- ☐ 36–45 years
- ☐ 46–55 years
- ☐ Over 55 years

Q3. Highest level of education completed
- ☐ No formal qualification
- ☐ Primary
- ☐ Secondary
- ☐ Higher education (university or equivalent)

Q4. Area of residence
- ☐ Urban area (Cameroon or Equatorial Guinea)
- ☐ Rural area
- ☐ Abroad / Diaspora — please specify country: _____

Q5. To which Kwasio dialect community do you primarily belong?
- ☐ Mbvumbo
- ☐ Mabi
- ☐ Bisio
- ☐ Other — please specify: _____

Q6. Country of origin / nationality
_____

Q7. Place of current residence (town, district, country)
_____

Section II — Linguistic Practices and Competence

Q8. Do you speak Kwasio?
- ☐ Yes, fluently
- ☐ A little
- ☐ No

Q9. In your everyday life, how often do you use Kwasio?
- ☐ Always
- ☐ Often

☐ Sometimes
☐ Rarely
☐ Never

Q10. How well do you understand each of the three Kwasio dialects? (please tick one box per row)

Mbvumbo:
☐ Very well ☐ Well ☐ With difficulty ☐ Not at all

Mabi:
☐ Very well ☐ Well ☐ With difficulty ☐ Not at all

Bisio:
☐ Very well ☐ Well ☐ With difficulty ☐ Not at all

Q11. In your view, what are the main differences between the Kwasio dialects (Mbvumbo, Mabi, Bisio)? *(open question)*

_____

Q12. In which contexts do you most often speak Kwasio? (multiple answers possible)
☐ At home, with the family
☐ With friends from the community
☐ At religious gatherings
☐ At community or cultural events
☐ On social media / messaging apps
☐ Other — please specify: _____

Q13. Do you transmit Kwasio to your children or to younger relatives?
☐ Yes, systematically
☐ Occasionally
☐ No
☐ Not applicable

Q14. How did you learn Kwasio?
☐ Within the family, as a mother tongue
☐ Through contact with the community
☐ Through self-study (books, internet, apps)
☐ Other — please specify: _____

Q15. Can you read Kwasio?
☐ Yes
☐ A little
☐ No

Q16. Can you write Kwasio?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Q17. If yes, which writing system do you use? *(open question)*

_____

Section III — Attitudes toward Graphic Standardization

Q18. Do you think a unified writing system for the three Kwasio dialects would be useful?
☐ Yes, very useful
☐ Useful, but not a priority
☐ Not useful

Q19. Would you be in favor of a single writing system shared by all Kwasio speakers, regardless of dialect?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Q20. Please justify your answer to the previous question. *(open question)*

_____

Q21. What types of characters would you prefer to represent the sounds of Kwasio? (one answer)
☐ The Latin alphabet supplemented with phonetic symbols (IPA)
☐ The Latin alphabet supplemented with diacritics modifying specific letters of Kwasio
☐ A Kwasio-specific alphabet (original creation)
☐ The SIL alphabet already in use for several Cameroonian languages
☐ Other system — please specify: _____

Q22. Which sounds of Kwasio do you find most difficult to write down? Please give examples. *(open question)*

_____

Q23. In your view, should the orthography reflect the pronunciation of one specific dialect, or should it represent the language as a whole?

- ☐ It should reflect one specific dialect — please specify: _____
- ☐ It should represent the language as a whole, by integrating common features
- ☐ No opinion

Q24. How important is the notation of tones in writing Kwasio? Please explain. *(open question)*

_____

Section IV — Pedagogical Needs and Dissemination Strategies

Q25. Which teaching materials would you find most useful for learning or teaching Kwasio? (multiple answers possible)

- ☐ Mobile applications
- ☐ Books and printed manuals
- ☐ A dedicated website
- ☐ Classroom courses
- ☐ Other — please specify: _____

Q26. Which type of educational programme would you favor for the dissemination of Kwasio? (multiple answers possible)

- ☐ Online courses
- ☐ Community workshops
- ☐ Integration into the school curriculum
- ☐ Evening classes
- ☐ Other — please specify: _____

Q27. Which media do you consider most effective for promoting Kwasio? (multiple answers possible)

- ☐ Radio
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ Television
- ☐ Newspapers / printed press
- ☐ Other — please specify: _____

Q28. Would you be willing to take part in language revitalization activities (workshops, training, content creation, awareness campaigns)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Q29. Do you have any additional comments, suggestions, or expectations regarding the standardization and revitalization of the Kwasio language? *(open question)*

— End of questionnaire —

Thank you for your participation.

Charles Lwanga Bouh Ma Sitna

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