

## ARTICLE

# When Language Loyalty Doesn't Work: The Case of a Small Language in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan

Abdelrahim Hamid Mugaddam <sup>1\*</sup> , Maha Abdulghafar Alayyash <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, College of Arts, Jouf University, Sakaka 72311, Saudi Arabia

<sup>2</sup> College of Languages and Translation, Department of English, Jeddah University, Jeddah 21589, Saudi Arabia

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the linguistic situation of Tima, a little-described and highly endangered language that is spoken in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan. It aims to analyze the status and use of the Tima language in the region, focusing mainly on multilingualism, language use in different domains, and attitudes that Tima speakers have toward their own language. The main objective is to see whether there is a correlation between positive attitudes toward the language and its actual vitality among its immediate speech community. Many speakers of endangered languages express strong loyalty to their ethnic mother tongues while they shift at significant rates to the dominant languages. A sociolinguistic survey was conducted among 1,189 individuals selected primarily to represent five age groups (ranging from seven to 60+ years old). Questions were asked about demographic information, linguistic repertoire, language use, and language attitudes. Results showed that a vast majority of the sample population still has a mastery of the Tima language and uses it exclusively at home. However, multilingualism and the use of English and Arabic in more practical domains, together with positive attitudes toward these two languages, indicate a possible language shift among Tima speakers in the near future.

**Keywords:** Tima; Language Loyalty; Language Maintenance; Language Shift

### \*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Abdelrahim Hamid Mugaddam, Department of English, College of Arts, Jouf University, Sakaka 72311, Saudi Arabia; Email: [hammaad@ju.edu.sa](mailto:hammaad@ju.edu.sa)

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 31 July 2025 | Revised: 18 September 2025 | Accepted: 19 September 2025 | Published Online: 24 October 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i11.11400>

### CITATION

Mugaddam, A.H., Alayyash, M.A., 2025. When Language Loyalty Doesn't Work: The Case of a Small Language in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(11): 1063–1076. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i11.11400>

### COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2025 by the author(s). Published by Bilingual Publishing Group. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

# 1. Introduction

In the linguistically complex Nuba Mountains area, west of the River Nile in central Sudan, about 40 different languages are spoken, belonging to at least two different language phyla: Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan. The strategic location of the region, together with its fertile land, has attracted many people from different parts of Sudan, as well as West African pilgrims who made their way to Mecca through the region. This has resulted in tremendous genetic variation in the Nuba Mountains as people from diverse ethnic backgrounds have settled in the region for thousands of years. Among these varied ethnic affiliations, the Tima group is the focus of the present paper. The tribe of Tima has its own language called Tima (also known as Lumoric among its speakers). According to the standard classification of African languages by Greenberg<sup>[1]</sup> and Greenberg<sup>[2]</sup>, there are four language phyla: Niger-Kordofanian (nowadays referred to as Niger-Congo), Nilo-Saharan, Afroasiatic, and Khoisan. Based on the same classification, Tima is part of the Katla cluster within the Kordofanian branch of Niger-Congo, which further includes Katla proper, as well as Julud<sup>[3]</sup>. Although estimated numbers of speakers of many Nuba Mountains languages are found in a number of sources<sup>[4]</sup>, no figure is given regarding Tima speakers. This indicates that very little is known in the literature about the Tima language. According to recent information collected by Dimmendaal<sup>[5]</sup>, based on interviews with Tima individuals, the current number of ethnic Tima is probably around 5,000. About 4,000 of them live in four villages in the Nuba Mountains, on and around Jebel Tima, 10 miles southwest of the Katla area.

As is the case with many languages in Sudan, Tima is ranked high on the list of seriously endangered languages. This fact was first realized by Tima community members, especially those living in Khartoum, who indicated that their children were unable to pick up the Tima language. In the Nuba Mountains, multilingualism in Arabic, English, and Tima proved to be a major source of threat to Tima, as youngsters tend to use Arabic and English more often in their interactions outside the home domain. In addition, code mixing/switching has been a characteristic feature of communication within the community. To reverse the situation, a language committee was set up by the Tima community with the prime aim of finding possible means and strategies to maintain the group's language and cultural heritage.

This communal language planning body is named the Tima Language Committee (henceforth TLC). This is the main reason for choosing Tima, rather than any other disappearing language in the region, for our documentation project. The Tima community proved to be well aware that their language, together with the group's cultural identity, will die out soon if something serious is not done to preserve it.

Due to political insecurity (i.e., the civil war) in Sudan over the past decades, many groups from the Nuba Mountains (and other parts of Sudan) have moved to major urban areas, such as Khartoum and the Jezira region. Today, there are probably over 1,000 Tima people in Khartoum. The language shift to Arabic has strongly influenced the Tima community in Khartoum. This can be seen clearly among Tima children, who are growing up with Arabic and no longer speak Tima. The studies by Miller and Abu-Manga<sup>[6]</sup> and Mugaddam<sup>[7]</sup> suggest that second-generation migrants in Khartoum hardly acquire the first language of their parents. Although there are differences in linguistic solidarity between the various ethnic groups, there is a clear tendency among second-generation speakers to adopt Arabic as a first language. In this respect, the situation in Khartoum is comparable to many other urban areas in Africa, where there is a growing tendency to switch to the dominant languages. Given the expected economic growth in Sudan (due to exploitation of oil, diamonds, gold, uranium, and other minerals), the urbanization process will probably attract more migrants from the Nuba Mountains as well as other parts of Sudan to the major urban areas.

# 2. Literature Review

A language shift takes place when a minority language is used in a predominantly monolingual culture and society<sup>[8]</sup>. The minority language is removed gradually from its traditional domains in favor of a predominant language. Different social factors force speakers of a minority language to shift from using their own mother tongue for different purposes. Migration from the homeland provides a good example of the process of a language shift. Countries like the United States of America, England, and Australia witnessed a significant shift from migrant families' mother tongue to English. Children of these families—who were already exposed to English in the media, or in shops, and streets before starting school—must use English as the only medium of commu-

nication at school, as well as the language of instruction. Afterwards, English becomes the normal language for interaction with other children as well as their family members. The same situation is true for children who move from their home villages and settle in Khartoum and other urban centers across Sudan. Arabic is the only language of communication and instruction at school, which means that children must use it in all domains of communication. Migrant children may face social pressures and bullying from their classmates because of their language or the way they speak Arabic. A language shift to Arabic is expected for these children in Sudan's predominantly monolingual urban centers.

In countries such as the United States, England, New Zealand, and Australia, speaking good English has been accepted as a sign of successful assimilation, which ultimately indicates abandoning the minority language<sup>[8]</sup>. This means that many migrant families gradually shift away from their mother tongues toward English. According to Holmes and Wilson (*ibid.*), this may take two generations to complete. Typically, migrants are monolingual in their mother tongue; their children are bilingual in English and their mother tongue; and their grandchildren are monolingual speakers of English. People may shift location and tongue under the influence of political and economic factors, such as the need for work and shelter. Over the last four decades, many speakers of Sudanese languages from Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and South Sudan have shifted to Khartoum and consequently to Arabic to get work or secure shelter following wars in the homeland. Miller and Abu-Manga<sup>[6]</sup> reported a significant shift from migrants' mother tongues to Arabic. Children and youths were among the most affected by a language shift to Arabic; as it was the only language of communication in schools, universities, the streets, and work settings. Older migrants who still speak their ethnic languages as mother tongues were found to have used Arabic predominantly in all domains of communication, including the home domain.

Mugaddam<sup>[7]</sup> conducted a study among speakers of ethnic languages in Khartoum. A stratified sample of ethnic migrants was selected from 14 ethnic groups to represent five: Northern Sudan, South Sudan, Eastern Sudan, Darfur, and the Nuba Mountains. The five regions are known in Sudan for their rich linguistic and cultural diversity. Due to economic and political factors, including the search for better

living conditions and effects of wars (in South Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and Darfur), many people have left these regions and settled in Khartoum. A sociolinguistic survey was conducted among 840 individuals, including three age groups: children, youths, and elderly people. Questionnaires and structured interviews were used to gather information about language use in different domains and language attitudes. The results showed a significant language shift toward Arabic across the age groups, especially for children and youths. A language shift was reported among the participants, despite their positive attitudes toward their own languages.

Aipolo and Holmes<sup>[9]</sup> studied the linguistics of Tongan speech communities in New Zealand. A questionnaire was administered to a random selection of Tongan-speaking individuals to gather data on language proficiency, language use, and language attitudes. The results suggest that although the Tongan language was strongly preferred and maintained by Tongan communities, a significant shift toward English was reported among the different age groups, especially younger generations. This indicates that a positive attitude toward a language does not necessarily lead to its maintenance within a speech community. This result confirms work by Miller and Abu-Manga<sup>[6]</sup> and Mugaddam<sup>[7]</sup> that a positive attitude may play no role in controlling the process of a language shift.

A language shift is not always a consequence of migration. Political, economic, and social changes within a community may also cause radical linguistic changes. Gal's<sup>[10]</sup> study of language change in Oberwart, Austria, serves as a good example of the economic and social changes that can strongly affect the linguistic behavior of a community. In the 1920s, Oberwart was a small village where local people used Hungarian to communicate with each other and German with outsiders. When the economy of the village changed from agricultural to industrial, the function of German expanded, as it was the language of the capital and so became key to job opportunities and education. It has become the high language in Oberwart, with Hungarian reduced to the status of low language used within the family domain and for friendly interaction between local Oberwarters. German is the language of schools, official transactions, and economic advancement. Learning German became important for survival in the village, as it was associated with social

and economic well-being. Speaking Hungarian, on the other hand, was considered a sign of 'peasantness' and social backwardness. As a result, young people started using German in friendly interactions, and parents used it with their children in the home domain.

Another example of a language shift within a non-emigrant community is introduced by Hindley<sup>[11]</sup>, who investigated a language shift toward English among Irish speech communities in Ireland. English has been represented in Ireland since 1170, with occasional large-scale settlements of English speakers during the subsequent centuries. Bilingualism of Irish and English was witnessed first in the north and east, and by 1800, monolingualism in Irish was increasingly rare in Ireland. English became key to new job opportunities, and parents encouraged their children to learn it more than the ethnic mother tongue. This discouragement of Irish was further enhanced by the devastating famines of 1845–1849, which caused huge migration movements from Ireland. By 1922, the Irish language was mainly used only by the Catholic community and was no longer a native language on a considerable scale.

In New Zealand, Holmes<sup>[12]</sup> reported a significant language shift to English among Māori speech community. According to Holmes, with the arrival of the Europeans in New Zealand, English assumed an absolute dominance of the linguistic landscape. This is because the colonial authorities imposed their language in all domains of communication, including education, religion, and administration. In this prospect, Māori people had no choice other than conforming to the new reality to win a living and find a place for their children in the English-medium schools. This resulted in a notable decline in the number of Māori speakers. Holmes argues that language shift to English among Māori speech community is due to a variety of factors, such as institutional support to English, the legal status of English as an official language, and the social pressures on Māori speakers to comply with English cultural norms and lifestyle. Although successful social efforts were made to revive Māori language (i.e., Treaty of Waitangi and Māori language immersion schools), Holmes warns that the Māori language is still highly endangered due to the increasing dominance of English over most domains of language use in New Zealand.

Reporting on language situation in Haiti, Holmes<sup>[12]</sup> stated that many Haitian people regard French as the only

real language and the high variety. This is despite the fact that both French and the creole Haitian language were named as national languages in the 1983 constitution. The role of Haitian Creole as a means of everyday interaction is completely ignored. The language is still used within the family domain at home, with friends, and other people in the streets and the markets. However, some people highly valued Haitian creole and regard it as the best means for expressing their feelings and social identity. Holmes reiterates the role jointly played by factors of different nature namely, social, political, and economic, in determining the status and use of a given language.

In South Africa, scholars have expressed concerned that the dominance of English in education and economy seriously jeopardizes the linguistic diversity in the country. However, other researchers contend that, despite the growing dominance of English, many speech communities in South Africa still commend the role of their languages as a symbol of cultural and social identity. Recent research suggests that the increasing use of English in South Africa has led to an increase in bilingualism, which does not necessarily threaten indigenous South African languages. Posel and Zeller<sup>[13]</sup> investigated language shift from Afrikaans to English using Population Census data from 1996 to 2011. They concluded that the use of Afrikaans increased despite a decrease in the number of children who acquire it as a first language. This resulted in a considerable growth in bilingualism in English and Afrikaans, rather than a language shift from Afrikaans to English. The same conclusion has been reached by Mesthrie<sup>[14]</sup>, who reported that speakers of Khoe-San languages and Malay have been bilingual in their own languages and Afrikaans. A similar case of shift was noticed from Indian languages to English among the KwaZulu-Natal Indian communities. Mesthrie argues that multilingualism, identity, and economic integration are among the factors influencing language shift in these communities.

A language shift among non-immigrant communities in Sudanese contexts has been investigated by a number of scholars. Said Ahmed<sup>[15]</sup> studied language use among three speech communities in the Nuba Mountains: Dair, Angarko, and Habila. The study was based primarily on a large-scale linguistic survey conducted in the Nuba Mountains in 1976. Data analysis showed a significant rate of language shift toward Arabic among the three ethnic groups

surveyed. The analysis also suggested that Arabic was used as a language of wider communication in different domains, including family interactions. The findings of this study confirm those of Ismail<sup>[16]</sup> in Heiban, the Nuba Mountains. Similar findings were reached by Zummrawi<sup>[17]</sup>, who examined the dynamics of language change among the Nobiin speech community in New Halfa, Eastern Sudan. The researcher concluded that Arabic was gradually dominating all domains of communication in Halfa Aljadeeda. This was evident from the presence of three patterns of language use: Nobiin exclusively, Nobiin and Arabic (Nobiin dominant), and Arabic exclusively. People in the city tended to use Arabic more than their own ethnic language, Nobiin, because they believed it was the language of official transactions, education, and economy. This growing concern for Arabic, according to Zummrawi, could possibly lead to a loss of Nobiin in the long run. The same pattern of shifting to Arabic was reported by Mahmoud<sup>[18]</sup> in his study of the language situation in Juba, South Sudan. The survey covered 2,894 school children who were asked about language proficiency, multilingualism, and language use. The analysis showed that Arabic was spreading rapidly among the inhabitants of Juba Town to the extent that it had developed as a well-established variety known as Juba Arabic (a pidgin Arabic). The new variety was picked up by children as a mother tongue, which meant that local languages in Juba were no longer mother tongues for a considerable number of children. Mahmoud attributed the rise and dominance of Arabic in Juba to several factors, including economic, social, and political changes within speech communities in Juba.

Based on the above cases of language shift in the African context and elsewhere is primarily driven by socioeconomic or cultural pressures. Speakers of minority languages are forced to use the dominant language to find jobs, secure education for their children, and get integrated into the broader community. Given the rich and diverse linguistic landscape in Africa, many African languages are already in the process of shift or even death due to a variety of agents, including socioeconomic factors, sociopolitical factors, urbanization, and globalization.

Investigating the sociolinguistics in Tima villages is very important for several reasons. First, the investigation will examine the domains in which Tima, instead of Arabic

or some other language, is preferred. Second, we will obtain a good idea about the range/intensity of language shift or maintenance among the Tima speech community. The study's results are expected to help materialize the future maintenance efforts made by the TLC, as well as contribute to knowledge in the field. To this end, the study aims to fulfilling the following objectives:

1. To investigate the process of language shift and maintenance among the Tima speech community.
2. To examine the domains in which the Tima language is used.
3. To explore (i) Tima-speaking individuals' attitudes toward their own language and (ii) the effects these attitudes have on the process of language shift or maintenance that the individuals experience.

### 3. Methods

As stated above, a study of the sociolinguistic dimension of the Tima language is very important for the Tima language documentation to be implemented. It is hoped that such a study will come up with interesting findings that are useful in different areas of Tima investigation (e.g., phonological and syntactic description, dictionary, and textbook production). To understand the sociolinguistic aspects of Tima, we need to examine the degree of language endangerment among the Tima speech community, the domains in which Tima is used, the language repertoire of Tima speakers, dialectal variations within Tima, and attitudes toward Tima and other languages spoken in the Tima area. Given the fact that such information is extremely difficult to collect from people outside of the target community, we thought that TLC could help with a substantial part of the process of data collection. In fact, one of the main aims of the project is to empower the tribal Tima community in language-related issues, and one way of doing this is by getting them involved in the project, not only as participants but also as consultants and partners.

#### 3.1. The Questionnaire

The study was based on quantitative research principles. A questionnaire was designed to measure language proficiency, language use, and attitudes<sup>[19]</sup>. The questionnaire

consisted of three parts. In the first part, detailed information on the informants, such as age, sex, parents' ethnic affiliation, place of birth, and the village in which the informant lived, was requested. In the second part, questions were asked about language use, covering several subjects (the home, outside the home, with relatives, and at work/school). In the third part, questions and 'neutral' statements on language attitudes were placed. Informants were asked about the language(s) they would like to learn to read and write with, the language(s) they would like their children to learn, and how they found loanwords within the Tima language. The present paper will deal only with questions on language proficiency, multilingualism, and language use in two domains (i.e., inside and outside the home), along with two questions on language attitudes (the language that informants like to read and write with, and languages that parents prefer their children to learn. The remaining questions can be investigated in detail by other researchers (part of the data has been used in a publication by Mugaddam and Abdelhay<sup>[20]</sup>).

### 3.2. Participants

The informants of the present study numbered 1,189 in total and were selected from five age groups: 7–12 years (239 informants), 13–19 years (212 informants), 20–39 years (240 informants), 40–59 years (238 informants), and 60+ years (260 informants). The informants were selected carefully in order to have a representative sample from the four Tima villages: Balool, Kew, Mariam, and Tambo (287 participants for each village).

The survey was organized by the TLC in the Tima area. Five research assistants from each of the four villages were employed to help with the administration of the questionnaires. They were briefed on the aims of the survey and trained on how best to conduct it. The work went well under the close supervision of both the TLC and the researcher. The data collection process took about a week, during which the research assistants showed a high level of commitment and enthusiasm, leading to a satisfactory outcome. One of the most important outcomes of the survey is that the whole Tima community became aware that a serious step toward documenting the group's language has been taken. This will facilitate the implementation of the entire project, as almost all members of the community strongly support it and look forward to its expected outcomes.

### 3.3. The Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted among a selected sample of the population to make sure that all questions are clear and that they lead to reliable results. The objectives were to examine patterns of language use, degrees of bilingualism, and intergenerational transmission, as well as to assess attitudes toward the local language in relation to Arabic and neighboring languages. The study provided preliminary insights into the possible problems to be encountered in the field, which have been addressed by modifying some questions and clarifying some concepts.

## 4. Data Analysis and Results

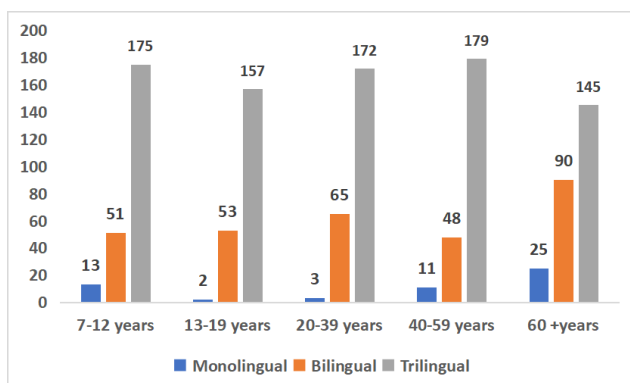
In analyzing the main objective of the study investigating whether Tima is maintained by its immediate speech community. Our discussion will be restricted to questions covering language proficiency, language use in two main domains (i.e., inside and outside the home), and language attitudes. To this end, data analysis is organized into three sections: multilingualism, language use, and language attitudes.

### 4.1. Multilingualism

Contact with other languages has been common among Tima group members for a long time. The group maintains social and economic ties with Katla, Julud, Tulishi, Tabaq, and some Arab groups, as well as other tribes in the Nuba Mountains. As a result, multilingualism can obviously be seen across the different age groups in Tima villages. Languages such as Arabic, Katla, Julud, and English were frequently reported in the survey. **Figure 1** summarizes multilingualism across the five age groups covered by the survey.

**Figure 1** shows that multilingualism is significantly seen among the sample population, especially older generation participants. More than 69% of participants reported that they were able to speak three languages. While trilingualism in Tima, Arabic, and a local language is dominant among older generation respondents, Tima, Arabic, and English were found among younger generations. The noticeable presence of English among young Tima men and women stems from the fact that it is used as the only medium of instruction in schools in the Tima area. Although Arabic is

not represented in the educational system, one can easily observe that it is used widely in different domains of communication. Our personal observations during regular visits to Tima villages indicate that almost everyone in the area can, at least, express himself/herself in Arabic. The fact that Arabic plays the role of the *lingua franca* in the Nuba Mountains, and its status as the language of administration and education in Sudan, justify its growing status and use in the area.



**Figure 1.** Multilingualism among the Tima speech community by age.

Also, most older men and women who speak three languages reported that they could communicate in at least one neighboring language, namely Katla and Julud. Languages such as Tabaq, Temein, Tulishi, and Wali were reported with different degrees of proficiency. That is, some of the elderly were able to interact with speakers of these languages with some difficulty, while younger generations seemed to understand the languages when they were spoken, without being able to interact with them. Younger generation participants also reported passive knowledge of Katla and Julud languages. This is evident in their answers to the question of ‘Which language do you understand but are unable to communicate with?’ This is mainly for two reasons. First, it is possible that the three languages (Tima, Katla, and Julud) are genetically related and thus there is a vast area of similarity among them, especially at the lexical level. Second, the Tima, Julud, and Katla areas are geographically very close to each other, which facilitates social interaction among the three speech communities. Social networking between Tima people and speakers of Katla and Julud strongly supports the second hypothesis. A considerable number of the participants indicated that they socialized intensively with people from Julud and Katla.

Multilingualism, as such, among the Tima speech com-

munity, does not necessarily lead to a language shift within it. Other factors influencing the maintenance, shift, or death of a language may play a greater role in the ongoing shift experienced by some members of the Tima speech community. This can include economic factors, social factors, religion, education, ties with the homeland, degrees of similarities between minority and majority languages, mixed marriages, attitudes, government policy, and patterns of language use<sup>[21]</sup>. Government language policy in the area, favoring English (the medium of instruction in Tima schools), together with the growing role of Arabic in the area, proved to be important factors contributing to the shift away from ethnic languages. Since the two languages are key for economic and social advancement, one expects that ethnic languages in Sudan, including Tima, are seriously endangered.

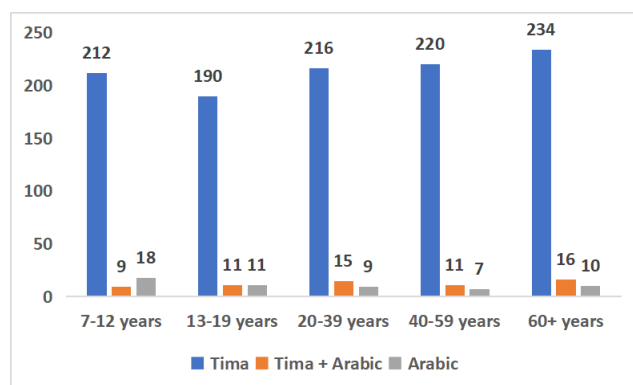
## 4.2. Language Use

Sociolinguistic studies in the Sudanese context suggest that language conflict leading to language endangerment takes place between Arabic and other Sudanese tribal languages<sup>[6,7,18,22,23]</sup>. The conflict normally results in the dominance of Arabic over all domains of communication, coupled with recession on the part of the tribal language. The situation in Tima villages is a bit different. That is, in addition to Arabic, the Tima language is in fierce competition for survival in its own territories. English and other local languages, such as Katla, Julud, and Tulishi, are spoken by many of Tima men and women. If Arabic alone succeeded in removing many local languages from all domains of communication, as the studies show, Tima seems to be a rather unfavorable situation, as is the case with many languages. In the following subsections, we investigate language use in different domains within the Tima speech community, namely the home domain where a language is used with family members and outside the home (streets, markets, schools).

### 4.2.1. Language Use in the Home Domain

Certain social factors, such as who a person is talking to, the social context of the conversation, and the function and topic of the conversation, are important in explaining language choice in many speech communities. In a family domain, for instance, the interaction will take place within the home setting. Typical participants will be family members, and topics will often be family business or activ-

ities. **Figure 2** shows the distribution of language use in the Tima home domain. Analysis of the data suggests that Tima assumes an absolute dominance of communication in the home domain. More than 90% of the participants reported that they used Tima in discussing family business and/or conducting an ordinary interaction with family members. The table also indicates that the use of Tima is predominantly within the home domain, consistent across the different age groups. Interestingly, over 88% of Tima youngsters (7–12 years old) use their ethnic language in everyday conversation at home.



**Figure 2.** Language use in the home domain by age.

The use of Arabic exclusively and Arabic/Tima, on the other hand, was reported by only 4.6% and 5.04%, respectively. The use of Arabic, predominantly within a Tima family setting, comes to less than 10% of the sample population. This means that the use of Arabic in the home domain declines with age. The younger a speaker is, the more Arabic he/she is likely to use in interacting with family members. In all cases, the figures suggest a high level of language maintenance among the Tima speech community. These results seriously contradict the conclusions reached by a few studies carried out among vernacular speech communities in other parts of Sudan, including the Nuba Mountains. In all these studies, Arabic was found to have removed local languages from their traditional domain, the home.

Based on the findings discussed above, it is obvious that the Tima language remains unchallenged in the home domain. The language is used predominantly in everyday communication, storytelling, and other social activities. Some elderly Tima people reported that they insisted on transferring the group's language to the younger generation. They did this by talking to their children and other family mem-

bers in the Tima language. What further enhances this tendency is that some of the elderly people had no knowledge of Arabic at all. Therefore, the only means of communication with sons, daughters, and grandchildren is via the Tima language. Grandparents, then, played an important role in maintaining Tima as a vital language, whereby the group's cultural heritage (e.g., folktales and songs) is transferred to youngsters. However, the introduction of modern technology, such as television with satellite dishes and smartphones, has provided more attractive sources of knowledge and entertainment, whose medium is by no means the tribal language—this seriously threatens the Tima speech community's efforts to safeguard their language. It is normal to see children gathered in front of televisions watching football matches, movies, or other programs. As all these programs are in English or Arabic, one can expect to see an increasingly shrinking role for the Tima language in family interactions among Tima youths and children.

#### 4.2.2. Language Use Outside the Home Domain

Language use outside the home normally covers a wide range of domains, such as streets, markets, schools, and government institutions. Use of a language outside the home or family is governed by the mechanism of language choice. A multilingual person may use different codes to communicate with speakers of a different language. In Zaire, for instance, where three varieties of Swahili (standard, Kingwana, and vernacular) are spoken, a person may use standard Swahili in government institutions, Kingwana, a variety of Swahili spoken by those who attended school, and vernacular Swahili when meeting an uneducated friend. In a highly homogeneous community like Tima, where the community language is spoken by almost all of the people, speakers of other languages may have little opportunity to use their own languages. Therefore, they have to use Arabic, the common *lingua franca*, in their everyday interactions. However, English can be used in limited situations, such as talking with foreigners who work for international organizations, given the fact that Tima villages were among the war-affected areas in the Nuba Mountains. **Figure 3** gives the distribution of language use outside the home domain.

It is clear from Figure 3 that Tima is not used predominantly outside the family domain, such as in the streets, markets, and schools. More than one-third of the sample population reported that they used only Tima when interact-



ing outside their homes. Using Tima exclusively outside the home suggests that the speakers are all affiliated to the Tima tribe. The results also indicate that over 64% of the participants have already shifted away from Tima by using Arabic as the only medium of interaction in the streets and markets. The table shows that 49% of the first generation of Tima speakers, the oldest, used Tima exclusively outside the home domain. This means that almost half of this age group experienced a language shift outside this setting. The table also shows that 12% of the entire participants used only Arabic to communicate with people from outside the Tima community. English, on the other hand, was used by more than 7% of the whole sample population for different purposes. English is used by educated Tima individuals to interact with aid workers (relief organizations) and school teachers coming from Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan.

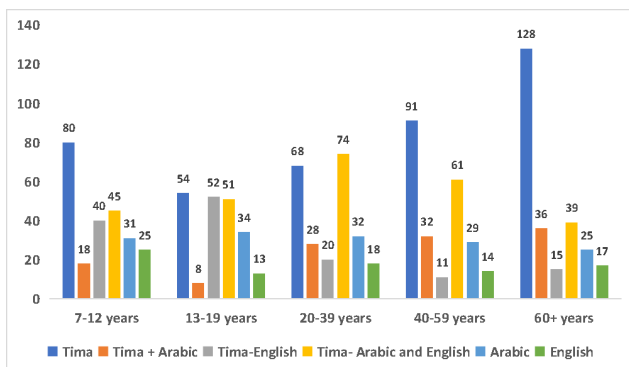


Figure 3. Language use outside the home domain by age.

A further analysis of **Figure 3** suggests that Arabic and English are used by Tima children and youths in communicating with friends and other people in the streets and schools. However, the use of English is limited to the schools, as it is the only medium of education. One would not expect to find children speaking English to each other outside the schools where they learn all the subjects in English under the supervision of English-speaking teachers. In all cases, one may claim that socioeconomic pressures forced many Tima individuals to use languages other than their own ethnic mother tongue in a variety of communicative domains. In other words, Tima plays a small role in its speakers' economic lives. Thus, for Tima youths and children to secure better living conditions, they must learn the language(s) that are associated with education and job opportunities. Given the expected economic growth in Sudan following the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, a language shift

toward Arabic will be accelerated among ethnic-language speech communities, including the Tima group. New job opportunities will be open to educated individuals, especially those with a good command of English.

### 4.3. Language Attitudes

Language attitudes refer to people's evaluation of a given language and its speakers. Language attitudes can be positive, negative, or neutral, and they play a significant role in the dynamics of language use, communication patterns, and interactions in a speech community. Measuring people's attitudes toward their languages helps to understand the process of language maintenance and/or shift. To examine the participants' attitudes toward the Tima language, there were two questions about the preferred language for literacy and parents' language preference for their children to learn.

**Figure 4** gives a summary of respondents' answers to the first question.

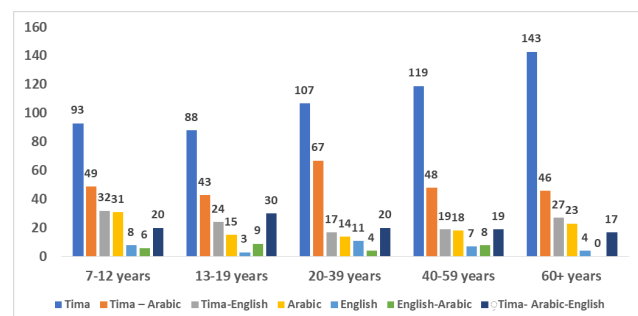


Figure 4. Attitudes towards literacy by age.

Analysis of **Figure 4** suggests that the Tima speech community strongly supports literacy in Tima, as well as two other languages: English and Arabic. More than 43% of the participants indicated that it was important for their children to learn reading and writing in the Tima language, which suggests a strong desire among the Tima speech community to preserve their own language. The desire to maintain the group's language increases as we move from the youngest to the oldest generation. That is, older generation Tima individuals are very keen to develop and maintain their own ethnic language through the educational system. The desire to represent the Tima language in this system will be more noticeable if we consider the four patterns of language preference. By doing so, we see that over 83% of the sample population supports literacy in the Tima language. A fur-

ther analysis of the table suggests that English was the least reported literacy language. This observation is consistent across the different age groups. This may be because the younger participants have already experienced literacy in English and would like to learn to read and write in Arabic, as well as their own ethnic language, Tima. In addition, older generation individuals apparently showed little interest in English as a literacy language in Tima schools because they were very concerned about the Tima language, looking for the best ways to transfer it to future generations.

The analysis also shows that a considerable number of participants believed that it was necessary for Tima children to learn other languages besides Tima. About 57% of the informants reported that it was very important for children to learn to read and write in Arabic and English. The two languages were reported because of the vital role they play in the people's socioeconomic and sociopolitical lives. These factors will shape people's attitudes toward the two languages and push Tima youths and children to learn them. In other words, for the younger generations to secure better living conditions, they have to develop their skills in English and Arabic. As a direct consequence, the Tima language may suffer neglect, leading to its loss among the younger generation, as it does not have a vital role in their socioeconomic and sociopolitical lives. However, the voice of the parents, who are very concerned about the future of their children, needs to be heard. To this end, parents were asked whether it was important for their children to be able to read and write in the Tima language. Figure 5 summarizes parents' attitudes toward literacy in the Tima language.

Attitudes to Arabic and English among Sudanese young generations are significantly influenced by factors of different natures, including political, economic, educational, and cultural. Arabic is seen as the only lingua franca and the language of education, religion, and culture. Besides being the only official language in Sudan, standard classical Arabic is believed to be the symbol of national identity for a wide range of the Sudanese community, at least for those claiming Arab descent. Non-Arabs Sudanese youth, on the other hand, insist on showing their social identities through their own ethnic languages without ignoring the sociopolitical and socioeconomic roles of the Arabic in the country<sup>[24–26]</sup>. The growing role of Arabic as the language of cultural and religious identity, as well as the medium of instruction in

schools and universities, enhances its status and use among young Sudanese from different ethnic affiliations, including Tima. However, it has been noted that many educated young Sudanese females would not tend to use their ethnic languages in public for the stigma associated with them by some sectors of the Sudanese community.

English, which is taught as a subject right from the fourth year of schooling, plays a significant role in the future of young Sudanese. The increasing role of English in education, especially in scientific and technical fields, made it an important key to science and technology. In this prospect, many Sudanese young people, including Tima (English is the only medium of instruction in Tima village schools), look at English as essential for future academic and professional success. They are aware of the status of Arabic as a language of communication among the diverse people of the Sudan, as well as a vehicle for cultural interaction and religious activities. English, on the other hand, is recognized as an international lingua franca, essentially needed for accessing economic opportunities, engaging in social media, and utilizing technology. As a result, young people in both urban and rural areas have positive attitudes to English, viewing it as a means of connecting with the outside world and facilitating access to good job opportunities.

**Figure 5** shows that more than 90% of the parents or parents surveyed believed that it was very important for their children to read and write in the Tima language. This almost unanimous consensus over the use of Tima in educating children was consistent across the different age groups. The figures reflect the strong determination among the Tima speech community to maintain their own language through using it as a medium of instruction or, at least, as a subject at school. Establishing a committee to shoulder the responsibility of developing and documenting the Tima language shows how serious the Tima speech community is to safeguard their ethnic mother tongue. The TLC is fully supported by all sectors of the Tima community, including some high-ranking officials in the government of South Kordofan State. Members of the committee have participated actively in the present project by supervising and coordinating the data collection sessions (i.e., sociolinguistic survey, phonology, morphology, and lexicology), which in turn made it possible for the team to accomplish its mission successfully and efficiently.

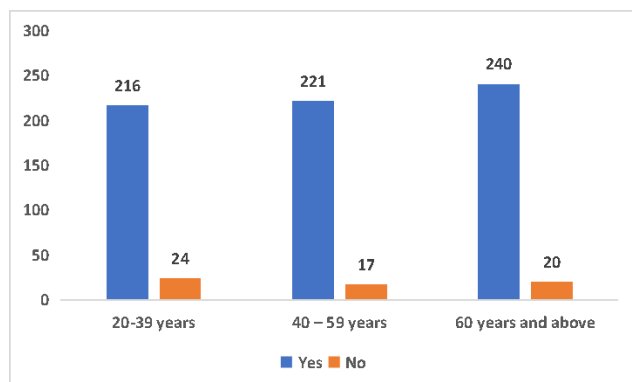


Figure 5. Parents' attitudes towards literacy.

## 5. Discussion

This study investigates the language situation among the Tima speech community in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan. The main objective of the study is to assess the process of language maintenance and shift, and the role of language loyalty in the process. The results suggest that, unlike the cases of language shift in Khartoum and other areas in Sudan, the Tima speech community displayed a considerable consistency between language loyalty and language maintenance. That is, while ethnic language individuals reported positive attitudes toward their languages, they shifted to Arabic, the predominant language in Sudan, Tima individuals show a positive attitude toward their language and maintain it. This is demonstrated by the fact that over 80% of the Tima speech community speaks the Tima language as a mother tongue and believes it to be an important part of their life. Perhaps the status of Tima people as a homogeneous community living in their homeland helped them maintain their language because they did not have to use another language to communicate with people outside their own ethnic group. In Khartoum and other urban centers, for instance, speakers of ethnic languages must use Arabic in everyday communication in a variety of domains, including the home.

The patterns of language use in Tima villages, as suggested by the results, offer a good explanation of the high rate of Tima language maintenance. People of all age groups reported the use of Tima predominantly inside the home domain and outside it. At home, parents were very keen to talk to their children using Tima, which enabled them to transfer the language to the younger generation. When children interact with others in the streets and village schools, they use Arabic and occasionally English (the only medium of

instruction at school). The use of English as the language of instruction at schools across the Tima villages has created a new reality that challenges the future status of the Tima language. This is because parents view English as an important language for the future of their children, given its role as a predominant international language and its importance to science and technology. Most of the parents we approached in the study emphasized the importance of English for their children's education and future job opportunities. Given the role of the Tima language as a symbol of the Tima ethnic community, with no vital role in other domains such as education and employment, children and youths will gradually shift away from their ethnic language. After completing secondary school, the children have to leave their home villages to go to university or to find a paying job. At this point, the Tima language becomes the symbol of Tima identity, while English is the language that is necessary to 'get on' and for well-being. This reminds us of the situation of Hungarian in Oberwart, which was reduced to the language of 'peasantness' while German was the language of advancement and high social<sup>[10]</sup>.

The results also showed widespread multilingualism among the Tima speech community. Many Tima individuals reported that, in addition to Tima and the closely related Katla language, they spoke neighboring languages, such as Tulishi (a member of the Kadu group; genetic affiliations not clear), Nyimang (Nilo-Saharan), Temein (Nilo-Saharan), and Arabic. Multilingualism as such may not be the main reason for the endangerment of the Tima language, as domains where such languages are used do not necessarily overlap. However, Arabic, which has become the dominant *lingua franca* in most parts of Sudan, including the Nuba Mountains, is encroaching upon Tima and other languages in various domains of communication. This is because Arabic is the only *lingua franca* among the diverse population of Sudan, as well as the main medium of instruction in schools and universities in the country. Arabic has become the dominant language in Sudan; thanks to the vital role it plays in the socioeconomic and sociopolitical aspects of life in the country. The domains of the local languages, particularly the informal ones, are not functionally protected (there is a lack of diglossia). Nevertheless, Arabic is not the only source of threat to the Tima language. English has emerged as a very strong competitor in the Tima area. It was observed that

young boys use English expressions alternated with Arabic language and not with their own ethnic language, Tima. One can claim that the sociolinguistic context in the Tima villages has become an arena of conflict between Tima and English, on the one hand, and Tima and Arabic, on the other.

Analysis of language attitudes clearly shows that the Tima speech community has a very positive attitude toward their own ethnic language, together with Arabic and English. While the Tima language is favored as a symbol of group identity, Arabic and English are favored for purely instrumental reasons. This is a very strong indication that Tima speech community members are very loyal to their language and culture. Many young Tima individuals from all age groups have indicated that they look forward to having their children taught the Tima language by the end of the project. However, strong loyalty to the language does not seem to have helped its community maintain it. This is the case even with foreign language learning, where some students report positive attitudes towards a foreign language while they fail to express themselves in it<sup>[27,28]</sup>.

The attempt to develop a literacy program in Tima reflects a collective will among the Tima speech community to maintain their language and transfer it to their children. The Tima community wanted their children to read and write in their own ethnic language. Literacy in the Tima language can be a very important force in maintaining the group's ethnic identity by creating a new context for using the language, which in turn will draw more attention to Tima's linguistic and cultural heritage.

## 6. Conclusion

An analysis of the linguistic situation of the Tima language in the Nuba Mountains has revealed that the Tima speech community still uses their ethnic language in different domains of communication. Many Tima individuals from different age groups indicated that they had mastered Tima as a mother tongue and used it as a primary language. A language shift to Arabic was noticed at a significant rate among the community, especially the younger generation. Most of the informants reported that they spoke more than one language, including Tima. That is, bilingualism and trilingualism were found among most of the participants who claimed knowledge of Tima, together with Arabic, English,

and/or a local language (i.e., Katala, Julud, or Tulishi). The analysis also revealed that while Tima dominated all aspects of communication within the home domain, the language was facing big competition from Arabic and English outside the home (i.e., streets, markets, schools, workplaces). This is strong evidence of a language shift, as the use of Tima was limited to its traditional domain: the home. The competition between Tima and the other two languages, Arabic and English, was also observed in the informants' language attitudes (toward Tima, English, and Arabic). Most of the sample population stressed the importance of English and Arabic in their lives, as being key to education and future job opportunities. Positive attitudes toward the Tima language were motivated by its symbolic function, signaling the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Tima people.

Overall, this study came up with a few indications regarding the sociolinguistic profile of the Tima language. First, we now have a better understanding of the status and use of the Tima language, providing a solid grounding for future research in different aspects of the language. Second, the level of language awareness and loyalty among Tima people has been further enhanced. Third, the team has now gained the Tima community's trust and their full cooperation in implementing the entire project. Fourth, primers and grammar textbooks in the Tima language will now be available for use at Tima schools. Finally, the practice of having a non-governmental language committee, such as the TLC, set up by a group of tribal people to look after their language, is an important step in involving the masses in managing linguistic and cultural diversity across different parts of the world. The experience can be a good asset for the implementation of the new language policy in Sudan, following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, and can invest in the experience of the TLC. It is a good example of the much-needed cooperation between tribal people (bottom-up) and linguists (top-down) in language planning efforts.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.H.M.; methodology, A.H.M.; formal analysis, M.A.A.; resources, M.A.A.; writing—original draft preparation, A.H.M. and M.A.A.; writing—review and editing, A.H.M. and M.A.A.; visualization, M.A.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the

manuscript.

## Funding

This work received no external funding.

## Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (Research Ethics Committee, Department of Linguistics, University of Khartoum).

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The data is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## References

- [1] Greenberg, J.H., 1963. The Languages of Africa. Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics: Bloomington, IN, USA.
- [2] Greenberg, J.H., 1966. Universals of Language. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA.
- [3] Meerpohl, M., 2012. The Tima of the Nuba Mountains (Sudan): A Social Anthropological Study. Rüdiger Köppe Verlag: Cologne, Germany.
- [4] Mugaddam, A.H., Dimmendaal, G.J., 2006. Sudan: Language Situation. In: Brown, K. (ed.). International Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. Elsevier: Oxford, UK. pp. 265–270.
- [5] Dimmendaal, G., 2009. Coding Participant Marking: Construction Types in Twelve African Languages. John Benjamins: Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- [6] Miller, C., Abu-Manga, A., 1992. Language Change and National Integration: Rural Migrants in Khartoum. Khartoum University Press: Khartoum, Sudan.
- [7] Mugaddam, A.H., 2006. Language Maintenance and Shift in Sudan: The Case of Ethnic Migrant Groups in Khartoum. International Journal of the Sociology of Language. 2006(181), 123–136. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJSL.2006.056>
- [8] Holmes, J., Wilson, N., 2022. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, 6th ed. Routledge: London, UK. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367821852>
- [9] Aipolo, A., Holmes, J., 1990. The Use of Tongan in New Zealand: Prospects for Language Maintenance. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development. 11(6), 501–521. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.1990.9994435>
- [10] Gal, S., 1978. Peasant Men Can't Get Wives: Language Change and Sex Roles in Bilingual Austria. Language in Society. 7(1), 1–16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500005303>
- [11] Hindly, R., 1990. The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary. Routledge: London, UK.
- [12] Holmes, J., 2013. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, 4th ed. Routledge: Abingdon, UK.
- [13] Posel, D., Zeller, J., 2019. Language Use and Language Shift in Post-Apartheid South Africa. In: Hickey, R. (ed.). English in Multilingual South Africa: The Linguistics of Contact and Change. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK. pp. 288–309.
- [14] Mesthrie, R., 2007. Language Shift, Cultural Change and Identity Retention: Indian South Africans in the 1960s and Beyond. South African Historical Journal. 57(1), 134–152.
- [15] Ahmed, M.S., 1979. An Analysis of the Nuba Mountains Language Survey: A Comparative Study of Language Usage in Dair, Angarko, and Habila [Master's Thesis]. University of Khartoum: Khartoum, Sudan. pp. 20–30.
- [16] Ismail, S., 1987. The Language Situation in Heiban [M.A. Thesis]. University of Khartoum: Khartoum, Sudan. pp. 18–23.
- [17] Zummrawi, F., 1980. Dynamics of Language Use Change in a Nubian Community in New Halfa [M.A. Thesis]. University of Khartoum: Khartoum, Sudan. pp. 21–26.
- [18] Mahmoud, U.A., 1983. Arabic in Southern Sudan: History and Spread of a Pidgin-Creole. FAL Advertising Co. Ltd.: Khartoum, Sudan.
- [19] Bell, H., 1975. Pidgin Arabic and the Language Survey of Sudan. In Proceedings of the International Conference on Pidgins and Creoles, Honolulu, HI, USA, 6–10 January 1975; pp. 1–11.
- [20] Mugaddam, A.H., Abdelhay, A., 2013. Exploring the Sociolinguistic Profile of Tima in the Nuba Mountains. In: Schaderberg, T., Blench, R.M. (eds.). Nuba Mountains Language Studies. Rüdiger Köppe: Cologne, Germany. pp. 297–324.
- [21] Romaine, S., 1992. Language, Education, and Development: Urban and Rural Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. Clarendon Press: New York, NY, USA.

- [22] Mugaddam, A.R.H., 2006. Language Status and Use in Dilling City, the Nuba Mountains. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 27(4), 290–303. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2167/jmmd444.1>
- [23] Jahalla, K.M., 2001. The Linguistic Situation in Al-Fashir City [Ph.D. Thesis]. University of Khartoum: Khartoum, Sudan. pp. 163–168.
- [24] Abdelhay, A., Makoni, B., Makoni, S., et al., 2011. The Sociolinguistics of Nationalism in the Sudan: The Politicisation of Arabic and the Arabicisation of Politics. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 12(4), 457–501. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2011.628079>
- [25] Abdelhay, A., Eljak, N., Mugaddam, A., et al., 2016. Arabicisation and the Khartoum Arabic Language Academy. *The Journal of North African Studies*. 21(5), 831–856. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2016.1215248>
- [26] Garri, D.S.A., Mugaddam, A.R.H., 2015. Language and Identity in the Context of Conflict: The Case of Ethnolinguistic Communities in South Darfur State. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 2015(235), 137–167. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2015-0018>
- [27] Aljohani, S., Mugaddam, A.H., 2025. The Impact of Foreign Language Anxiety on FL Speech Production of Saudi EFL Learners: Case Study of Saudi Secondary School Students in Medina Region. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(3), 150–162. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i3.8355>
- [28] Alanazi, S.S., Mugaddam, A.H., 2025. The Role of Motivation in Learning English as a Foreign Language at Northern Border University. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(4), 574–587. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i4.8861>