

The Development of Chuga: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of a Youth Vernacular in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examined Chuga as a distinctive variety of Swahili characterised by specific communicative patterns, localised lexical innovations, and shared sociocultural meanings. The variety is predominantly used by young adults residing in the informal settlements of Arusha, particularly within Sanawari and its surrounding communities. Rather than constituting a mere collection of variety expressions, Chuga encompasses a broader communicative repertoire that includes non-verbal cues, pragmatic strategies, metaphorical extensions, and implicit forms of understanding embedded in peer-group interaction. These features collectively reflect the socioeconomic realities, identity constructions, and creative linguistic practices associated with contemporary urban youth culture. The study adopted a qualitative design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and naturalistic conversations with Chuga-speaking youth, thereby documenting recurrent lexical items, semantic shifts, and context-dependent meanings. A total of 26 participants were selected using both purposive and convenience sampling strategies. The findings demonstrate that Chuga is not merely a transient youth variety but an emerging urban variety of Swahili within its speech community. The emergence of new lexical items justifies the characterisation of Chuga as a distinct linguistic variety and underscores the need for sustained scholarly attention, particularly regarding language variation, urban multilingualism, youth identity formation, and the ongoing evolution of Swahili in rapidly changing sociocultural contexts.

Key terms: Chuga, sociolinguistics, Tanzania, youth vernacular.

INTRODUCTION

Chuga, as an emerging urban variety of Swahili, represents a significant site for examining how linguistic innovation reflects and shapes contemporary social identities and interactions. Rooted in the principles of Sociolinguistics, this study proceeds from the understanding that language is intrinsically tied to its social environment and cannot be fully understood in isolation from the individuals and communities who use it. Rather than functioning as an autonomous system, language operates within networks of social relationships, cultural practices, and institutional contexts that influence both its structure and use.

Sociolinguistic inquiry further emphasises that language is dynamic and variable, with linguistic forms changing systematically in response to social conditions rather than randomly, as highlighted by Yohana (2009). Such variation reflects meaningful differences associated with particular groups, contexts, and communicative purposes, while also enabling speakers to express identity, affiliation, and social positioning (Fuller, 2007). Within this framework, the study identifies a key research problem: despite the increasing visibility and use of Chuga in urban settings, it is often dismissed as a transient youth variety rather than examined as a potentially stable and socially meaningful variety of Swahili. This lack of systematic scholarly attention creates a gap in understanding its structural features, social functions, and role in ongoing language change.

Consequently, the study seeks to address this gap by investigating whether Chuga exhibits the characteristics of a distinct urban variety, focusing on its patterns of variation, social recognition, and functional roles in communication. The discussion that follows is therefore expected to demonstrate how Chuga reflects broader processes of language variation, urban multilingualism, and identity formation, and to evaluate its significance in the continuing evolution of Swahili within rapidly changing sociocultural contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistics examines the systematic relationship between linguistic variation and social differentiation. Core dimensions of social stratification, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and social class, have been

shown to influence linguistic behaviour in predictable ways (Mallinson, 2011). These categories intersect with broader sociocultural and socioeconomic identities, shaping the selection of specific linguistic features. Such features may include phonological variation, morphological and syntactic patterns, intonation contours, and lexical innovations. Through these patterned variations, language reflects and reproduces aspects of social organisation.

Scholarly research emphasises that variation is not a deviation from a linguistic norm but an inherent characteristic of language systems (Kretzschmar, 2010). Variation may index group membership, signal generational identity, or express resistance and creativity within marginalised communities. Youth language practices in particular have been widely recognised as sites of linguistic innovation, often contributing to the development of new urban vernaculars. Within this broader theoretical context, examining localised varieties of Swahili offers insight into how social dynamics shape linguistic evolution.

Tanzania presents a complex and highly stratified linguistic ecology frequently described as triglossic, in which three language strata perform distinct societal functions. English serves primarily as a language of international communication, higher education, and certain formal administrative domains. Swahili functions as the national language and the most widely used lingua franca, facilitating communication across ethnolinguistic groups (Blommaert, 2005; Kanana, 2013). In addition, numerous indigenous languages are maintained within home and community domains, contributing to the country's rich linguistic diversity. Estimates of the number of indigenous languages vary; however, the Languages of Tanzania Project (2009) reports approximately 164 languages. Tanzania is frequently cited as having a high Linguistic Diversity Index (reported at 0.965), ranking among the most linguistically diverse countries in Africa and globally (Yohana, 2009). This multilingual context provides fertile ground for language contact, borrowing, code-switching, and the emergence of new linguistic varieties.

Over time, Swahili has developed numerous regional and social varieties. As Swahili expanded from its coastal origins into the interior regions of East Africa,

it encountered diverse linguistic communities, leading to localised adaptations and hybrid forms. Some estimates suggest that this process produced between 16 and 20 dialects (Takemura, 2018), reflecting the combined influence of trade, migration, urbanisation, and sustained contact with local languages. Urban youth varieties such as Chuga can be understood as a continuation of this historical continuum: just as earlier inland dialects emerged from the interaction between Swahili and local languages, Chuga has developed in contemporary urban centres through the blending of Swahili with youth-specific lexical innovation, social signalling, and multilingual urban practices. In this sense, Chuga is not a break from tradition but rather the latest stage in a long process of adaptive, socially conditioned variation, maintaining the pattern of localised and contextually meaningful forms of Swahili across time and space.

In inland regions such as Kilimanjaro, Arusha, Kigoma, Mwanza, and Kagera, Swahili is frequently spoken with phonological, lexical, and sometimes syntactic features influenced by indigenous languages. These features may include modified vowel systems, localised vocabulary, and shifts in prosodic patterns. Such variation illustrates processes of language contact, accommodation, and adaptation. As speakers adopt Swahili for wider communication, elements of their native phonology, grammar, and vocabulary often influence their speech as observed by Makulilo (2025). Over time, these contact-induced variations may stabilise and become recognisable regional or social dialects.

There are no prior studies examining the Chuga variety, making this research the first of its kind. Drawing on established frameworks in Sociolinguistics, the study situates Chuga within the broader linguistic landscape, where emerging urban varieties are increasingly recognised as legitimate forms of linguistic expression shaped by specific social environments. Building on this body of scholarship, the present study examines how localised forms of Swahili variation contribute to the development of socially meaningful varieties within contemporary Tanzanian communities.

METHODOLOGY

The study focused primarily on youth, especially males, as they are the main users of the Chuga variety. To capture their linguistic practices and perceptions, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 26 participants. This included 15 male youth speakers aged between 20 years and 30 years, 8 parents (6 females, 2 males), 5 shopkeepers (4 females, 1 male) aged 20 years and 25 years, and 3 male street vendors aged 18 years and 22 years. In addition to the primary participants, selected community members, including shopkeepers, street vendors, and parents, were interviewed to explore broader community attitudes toward Chuga. These interviews sought to examine perceptions of the variety's social status, its perceived appropriateness across different domains, and its potential social impact within the wider community.

The study used a qualitative approach to examine the linguistic behaviours, social attitudes, and experiences of Chuga speakers. Data collection involved open-ended, semi-structured interviews with youth, parents, shopkeepers, and street vendors. Verbatim transcripts were analysed manually through thematic coding to identify and group patterns including lexical innovations, phonological shifts, syntactic features, and code-switching. Recurring patterns were interpreted within a sociolinguistic framework, linking linguistic features to urban youth identity, peer-group dynamics, and the emergence of new Swahili varieties. This approach generated nuanced insights into Chuga's structural characteristics, social functions, and sociocultural significance, supporting its status as a distinct and meaningful urban variety of Swahili.

The interviews were conducted in the Sanawari area of Arusha, where participants regularly meet and interact. Conducting the interviews in a familiar and socially comfortable environment was intended to reduce formality and observer effects, thereby encouraging more natural and candid responses. This setting also enhanced ecological validity, as discussions occurred within a context closely associated with participants' everyday linguistic practices.

Finally, the study adhered to ethical principles in research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, participants were verbally informed of the study's objectives and procedures, and their voluntary, informed consent was obtained before they engaged in the interviews. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants' real names and identifying information were not recorded or used in the study. Furthermore, all data collected were treated as strictly confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What is Chuga?

The term Chuga, as used in Tanzania, carries multiple layers of meaning. It may refer to a geographical location (the Arusha Region in northeastern Tanzania), to the people originating from that region, and to a distinct urban youth variety of Swahili associated with a particular social group. This multiplicity illustrates how a single label can acquire geographical, social, and linguistic significance within a specific sociocultural context.

The use of informal regional nicknames is not uncommon in Tanzania. Such naming practices often reflect local perceptions, historical narratives, economic activities, or salient cultural characteristics. For example, Mwanza has been informally referred to as "Zoo," Dar es Salaam as "Bongo" and Kigoma as "Lwama." These monikers function as symbolic identifiers that encapsulate aspects of regional identity, though their precise origins are frequently based on popular usage and anecdotal circulation rather than documented historical accounts. In this context, Chuga operates as an informal alternative name for Arusha.

Beyond its geographical reference, Chuga also functions as a social self-identifier, particularly among certain groups of young men in Arusha. Its circulation has expanded through media platforms such as television and social media, contributing to its broader recognition. Media usage has reinforced the term's symbolic association with urban youth identity in Arusha, further solidifying its presence in popular discourse.

Linguistically, Chuga can be described as a youth-based urban vernacular variety of Swahili predominantly used by adolescents and young adults in specific neighbourhoods of Arusha, including areas such as Sanawari, Ngarinaro, Mianzini, Kijenge, and Ngulelo, among others. As with many urban youth varieties, it encompasses more than lexical slang. It involves distinctive communicative practices, including innovative vocabulary, semantic shifts, stylised pronunciation patterns, discourse strategies, and shared implicit meanings that index group membership. These features contribute to processes of identity construction, in-group solidarity, and social differentiation.

Structurally, Chuga appears to retain the grammatical framework of Swahili while incorporating lexical items and phonological influences from local languages spoken in the Arusha region, including Maasai, Meru, and Chaga.

Example:

Pimpu mangwai tupate kiyoo ng'aru

Swahili: Ongeza pesa tupate runinga mpya

English: Add some money to get a new television

Such contact-induced features are consistent with broader sociolinguistic processes observed in multilingual urban settings, where language varieties emerge through sustained interaction among speakers of diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Accounts from community members suggest that an earlier form of this Swahili variety began circulating in the 2000s, reportedly associated with specific occupational groups and later popularised through local music performances. Musical expression and youth cultural activities may have contributed to the diffusion and stylisation of this variety. Around 2020, a newer generation of speakers appears to have recontextualised and expanded the use of Chuga, embedding it more firmly within contemporary youth culture. It is this recent iteration of Chuga that constitutes the primary focus of the present study.

Chuga as Dialect

Language disparity, more commonly referred to as dialectal variation, describes the systematic differences that emerge within a language as a result of social, geographical, and group-specific influences

(Daulay, 2017). A dialect may be defined as a particular variety of a language associated with a specific speech community, whether regional or social in scope. It is often characterised as a form of language that is distinctive to a particular region or social group (Fitch, 2010). The concept of dialect is frequently contrasted with that of a standard language, which is typically codified, institutionalised, and used in formal domains such as education, administration, and media.

Dialectal variation is a natural consequence of language change and social interaction. Over time, speech communities develop distinctive linguistic features shaped by patterns of migration, social stratification, and contact with other languages or varieties. Dialects are commonly differentiated by features in phonology (pronunciation), morphology and syntax (grammatical structure), and lexicon (vocabulary). While dialects of the same language are often mutually intelligible, they may exhibit regionally or socially marked forms that distinguish them from standardised varieties.

Distinguishing between a language and a dialect remains one of the most debated issues in linguistics. Mutual intelligibility is frequently used as a primary criterion: if speakers of two varieties can understand each other without significant difficulty, the varieties are often considered dialects of the same language. However, this criterion is not always decisive. In dialect continua, for example, geographically adjacent varieties may be mutually intelligible, while varieties at opposite ends of the continuum may not be, despite being connected through intermediate forms. Moreover, political, historical, and ideological factors often influence classification. A variety may be designated as a separate language for reasons related to national identity, standardisation policies, or cultural autonomy rather than purely linguistic divergence. As noted by Cysouw and Good (2013), there is no universally accepted, objective standard for distinguishing between languages and dialects, and different classificatory methods may yield divergent results. Consequently, such distinctions are often shaped by both linguistic evidence and sociopolitical considerations.

Numerous attempts have been made to classify dialects systematically, often focusing on phonological

features. However, no single classification system has achieved universal acceptance (Khachaturyan et al., 2025). The difficulty lies partly in the fluid and overlapping nature of dialect boundaries, which rarely align with clear geographic or social divisions. Classification based exclusively on phonology may overlook other significant dimensions of variation, such as lexical and syntactic features.

Some scholars have therefore explored alternative quantitative and lexical approaches. Nagy et al. (2008), for instance, examined patterns of lexical distribution and statistical clustering to identify dialect groupings. Etman and Beex (2015) similarly argued that certain lexical items can serve as particularly effective markers of dialect differentiation. Wells (1982) proposed the use of selected lexical sets characterised by relatively stable pronunciation patterns as diagnostic tools for identifying dialectal variation. The underlying assumption of these approaches is that while many linguistic features may fluctuate across contexts, certain lexical items or sets function as reliable indicators of systematic variation.

In light of these considerations, the present study adopts a lexical approach to dialect classification. By focusing on vocabulary usage as a primary analytic dimension, the study aims to identify distinguishing features of the variety under investigation while acknowledging that dialect differentiation is inherently multidimensional and socially embedded.

Chuga Dialect Specific Vocabulary

Dialect-specific vocabulary refers to lexical items and expressions that are characteristic of a particular dialect and that distinguish it from other varieties of the same language, including the standardised form. Lexical variation constitutes one of the most salient and readily identifiable markers of dialect differentiation, alongside phonological (pronunciation) and morphosyntactic (grammatical) variation. Dialect words with vocabulary of the literary language not only ensure the popularity of the language but also serve to expand the possibilities of its expression (Clopper, 2021). This informs the lexical features of the Chuga dialect that emerged through processes such as language contact, urbanisation, social stratification, and identity construction. The following lexical items illustrate features that support

the consideration of Chuga as a distinct urban Swahili variety. These examples demonstrate recurrent patterns of lexical innovation and localised meaning that differentiate Chuga from standard Swahili and other regional varieties such as *Kisiu*, *Kimtang'ata*, *Kimvita*, *Kitumbatu*, *Kipemba* or *Kingozi*.

Table 1: Example of Chuga Specific Vocabulary

Chuga	Swahili	English
<i>Chandege</i>	<i>Wali</i>	Rice
<i>Nyangale</i>	<i>Nyama</i>	Meat
<i>Manjoksi</i>	<i>Maji</i>	Water
<i>Ndukule</i>	<i>Viatu</i>	Shoe
<i>Chali angu/ Chози/ Bamnyoli</i>	<i>Rafiki</i>	Friend
<i>Dekeree</i>	<i>Ku angalia</i>	To look
<i>Kiyoo</i>	<i>Runinga</i>	Television
<i>Piru/ Ng'aru</i>	<i>Mpya</i>	New
<i>Mbasha</i>	<i>mshamba</i>	Uncivilised
<i>Dingi</i>	<i>Baba</i>	Father
<i>Danja</i>	<i>Kufa</i>	Dai
<i>Gaza</i>	<i>Machafuko</i>	Chaos
<i>Nipo ngaa</i>	<i>Kushiba</i>	Satisfied (food)
<i>Chili/ Kungavu</i>	<i>Kutulua/Poa</i>	Peace
<i>Nenge</i>	<i>Njaa</i>	Hunger
<i>Pimpu</i>	<i>Ongezea</i>	Make addition
<i>Yechu/ Mbomani</i>	<i>Habari</i>	Greeting (Hi or hello)
<i>Bonya</i>	<i>Kula</i>	Eat
<i>Diko</i>	<i>Chakula</i>	Food
<i>Boo</i>	<i>Nyumbani</i>	Home
<i>Chapaa</i>	<i>Chapati</i>	Thin cake
<i>Gwara</i>	<i>Tano</i>	Five
<i>Mangwai</i>	<i>Pesa</i>	Money

Most of these words are coined, but some of them are derived from other languages, such as Maasai and Meru. For example: *Ni Mori?* Is there peace? *Haina wori.* No problem (from the Maasai language)

Ngaksali- Meru girl (from Meru language)

Mname- Uncivilised Street vendor (from Chaga language)

Ashenga yaye - Thanks God (from Maasai language)

The organisation of lexical items into grammatically well-formed and semantically coherent sentences is fundamental to the effective expression of ideas. An understanding of underlying structural principles, particularly syntax and morphology, is essential for successful communication. The syntactic and grammatical structures employed in sentence formation significantly influence how messages are interpreted and understood by interlocutors. In the case under investigation, the variety appears to retain the core syntactic framework of Swahili. That is, sentence structure, word order, agreement patterns, and basic clause organisation largely conform to those of Standard Swahili. The distinctive features of the variety are therefore more prominent at the lexical and, in some cases, phonological levels rather than in syntactic restructuring. For example:

Yechuyechuyechu
How are you? It's fine

Ni ojijoni ojijo oyeyo
Good morning/afternoon

Ni vimnyo?Mzunyo
What's up? It's fine

Mboma ni niga Chuye
What's up, comred! Good

Umekwara wapi manjoksi Kwa Chalii angu
Where did you get water? From my friend?

Community Attitude Toward Chuga

Research indicates that speakers are generally able to distinguish between dialects or socially marked varieties of their own language with considerable accuracy (Miringo, 2016). Within Arusha, Chuga is reportedly regarded by some community members as an argot or socially marked urban youth variety associated with marginalised groups, particularly in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In this respect, it has been compared to the early sociolinguistic positioning of Sheng in Nairobi, which was similarly associated with urban youth and lower

socioeconomic communities during its formative stages.

Findings from the present study suggest the presence of negative attitudes toward Chuga within certain segments of the Arusha community. Several respondents characterised the variety as socially undesirable, and its speakers were sometimes stigmatised on the basis of perceived lifestyle attributes, including dress style, peer group associations, and occupational status. Parents, shopkeepers, and other community members interviewed expressed concerns that the variety reflects what they view as declining moral standards or inappropriate public behaviour. During the interview, one parent reported that:

“Vijana wamechanganyikiwa, wanakaa katika makundi wanatengeneza lugha yao. Kwakweli wamewaharibu watoto wetu. Walimu wa watoto zetu wanalalamika lugha wanazotumia watoto wetu huko shuleni.”

Translation: “young people have become confused, they sit in groups and create their own language. Honestly, they have spoiled our children. Our children’s teachers complain about the kind of language our children use at school”

This statement indicates a deviation from accepted language form and is a sign of a lack of legitimacy in the community. Importantly, these perceptions reflect social evaluations rather than linguistic deficiencies. The stigmatisation appears to be linked not only to the linguistic features of Chuga itself, but also to broader social stereotypes associated with youth culture in particular urban settings. Some respondents further reported that children and adolescents increasingly use Chuga in domestic and school contexts, which they viewed as inappropriate in formal or intergenerational communication. These findings illustrate a common sociolinguistic pattern: non-standard or youth-associated varieties are frequently subject to negative stereotyping, particularly when they become visible beyond their original peer-group domains. The following excerpt exemplifies a community response regarding attitudes toward Chuga.

Kundi la Wadudu (Chuga) ni uchafu wa kijamii na kimaadili. Arusha haihitaji watu hawa ili kuwa maarufu. Arusha inahitaji usafi, usalama, ustaarabu, utaratibu, usomi, uungwana, uchapakazi na uwajibikaji. Tukatae na kupinga kabisa harakati zozote za kuukuza na kulivumisha kundi hili katika jiji la Arusha. Nani anapenda mwanawe awe sehemu ya watu hawa? Hakika hawa watu si wazuri katika jamii.

Wadudu (Chuga) is a social and moral disgrace. Arusha does not need these people to be famous. Arusha desperately needs cleanliness, safety, civility, order, scholarship, decency, hard work, and accountability. Let us completely reject and oppose any efforts to promote and popularise this "group" movement style in Arusha. Who wants their child to be part of these people? Indeed, these people are not good for society. (translation)

Negative attitudes toward an emerging or socially marked dialect, such as Chuga, within a shared language community can have significant sociolinguistic consequences. Such attitudes may contribute to processes of stigmatisation, social exclusion, linguistic insecurity among speakers, and, in some cases, reduced public use of the variety. These reactions are often rooted in broader language ideologies that privilege a standardised form while positioning non-standard varieties as less legitimate or less appropriate in formal domains.

Like wide non-standard or youth-associated varieties, the Chuga dialect appears to be subject to stigmatisation in certain segments of the community, where it is perceived as inferior to Standard Swahili. These perceptions are shaped by a complex interplay of linguistic, social, and ideological factors, including associations with age, socioeconomic status, and urban youth culture. Importantly, such evaluations reflect social judgments rather than inherent linguistic inadequacies. Negative community attitudes may contribute to linguistic insecurity among speakers and may influence patterns of language use, particularly in institutional or formal contexts where Standard Swahili is socially expected. However, sociolinguistic research also demonstrates that stigmatised varieties can simultaneously carry covert prestige within peer

groups, thereby sustaining their vitality despite external criticism. The long-term trajectory of Chuga will therefore depend on shifting social meanings, patterns of intergenerational transmission, and its functional domains of use.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Language variation is commonly associated with regional speech patterns; however, it also encompasses social, stylistic, and situational differences within a language. Chuga can be described as a socially marked urban variety of Swahili associated primarily with youth in certain low-income neighbourhoods of Arusha. From a linguistic perspective, any systematic variety of a language, including standardised forms, may be considered a dialect.

Given that there is no universally accepted criterion for distinguishing between two separate languages and two dialects of the same language (Cysouw & Good, 2013), this study adopts a lexical approach to examine whether Chuga can be characterised as a distinct variety within the Swahili linguistic continuum. Rather than presupposing its status, the analysis focuses on identifying recurrent and systematic lexical features that differentiate it from Standard Swahili and other regional varieties.

Preliminary observations suggest that the number of speakers, though relatively limited to particular youth networks, appears to be increasing, especially among members of Generation Z, born in the early 2000s, who are deeply engaged in digital communication, social media, and contemporary urban culture. As with many youth varieties, patterns of diffusion may be influenced by online platforms and peer-group interactions. At present, Chuga has received little formal scholarly attention and remains largely undocumented in academic literature. Its transmission appears to be predominantly oral and community-based, which may facilitate rapid innovation and change. While oral transmission does not necessarily imply endangerment, the absence of systematic documentation may result in limited historical records of its development and sociolinguistic trajectory. It is within this context that the present study seeks to investigate the sociolinguistic status of Chuga, its

distinguishing features, and its potential trajectory within the broader Swahili-speaking community.

Recommendations: Given that Chuga remains largely undocumented and is transmitted primarily through oral and peer-based interaction, future research should prioritise systematic documentation. This may include the development of a spoken corpus

comprising recorded conversations, digital communication samples (e.g., social media exchanges), and ethnographic field notes. Creating a structured lexical database would facilitate longitudinal analysis of lexical innovation, semantic shifts, and borrowing patterns. Such documentation would also contribute to preserving a historical record of the variety's evolution.

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