Drumspeak, Vol. 7 No. 3 (New Series) ISSN: 2821-8981 (online)
https://doi.org/10.47963/drumspeak.v7i2.2210

LINGUISTIC FIELDWORK: THE CASE OF CHIBARWE ORTHOGRAPHY IN ZIMBABWE

Chirimaunga Tendai

&

Mberi Nhira Edgar

Midlands State University (MSU)

Gweru, Zimbabwe

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5850-7914

+263 776 294 703

:chirimaungat@staff.msu.ac.zw

Email of corresponding author:

chirimaungat@staff.msu.ac.zw

Abstract

In contemporary language-related explorations, linguistic fieldwork is informing language development initiatives in key branches of applied linguistics such as phonology, morphology, lexicography, and sociolinguistics. This paper discusses the methodological issues in the practice of linguistic fieldwork, drawing on a case study on ChiBarwe orthography in Zimbabwe. The argument avowed in this paper is that orthography development requires fieldwork immersion, community involvement, and a systematic approach to deliverables that are consistent and linguistically accurate. It further argues that linguistic fieldwork in the context of orthographies does not solely involve data collection but also encompasses data verification, orthography validation, pilot testing, and community feedback under stringent ethical considerations. This study was guided by the Language Standardisation Model (LSM) as refined by Ayres-Bennett (2020), which outlines the key stages in developing a functional and accepted writing system for a language. Data were collected through practical fieldwork in which the researchers got immersed in the Barweland to collect data needed to develop a standard ChiBarwe writing system. In-depth interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), and elicitation (using the expanded Swadesh list for Bantu languages) were used during the fieldwork expeditions, and the findings were analysed qualitatively. The researchers also analysed existing draft orthographies developed for ChiBarwe to identify gaps, inconsistencies, and areas needing

refinement. Findings indicated that linguistic fieldwork for orthography designing follows three interrelated stages: pre-fieldwork, fieldwork proper, and post-fieldwork. Findings also indicate that dialectal variation and sociolinguistic identities complicated orthographic choices, yet community validation and pilot testing confirmed the orthography's accuracy, usability, and long-term viability.

Keywords: ChiBarwe, Language, Linguistics, Fieldwork, Standard, Orthography

Introduction

In Africa, many indigenous languages remain marginalised in formal education and official domains, often lacking standardised writing systems. As noted by Seifart (2006), the absence of practical orthographies is hindering literacy development, intergenerational transmission, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. In the case of Zimbabwe, its linguistic landscape has a tapestry of indigenous languages, each with its unique cultural heritage and linguistic features. However, the documentation and preservation of most of these indigenous languages has often been overlooked, leading to a significant gap in available linguistic resources (Mumpande, 2020; Magwa, 2021). Thus, language documentation has not received the attention that it deserves, especially given the rich linguistic and cultural heritage in the country. Despite the lack of a clear language policy, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013 officially recognises sixteen languages, including ChiBarwe (Nhongo & Tshotsho, 2021; Chirimaunga, 2025). Notwithstanding this linguistic diversity, only two indigenous languages, Shona and Ndebele, have received considerable attention in terms of documentation and description, and the rest remain marginalised, which is ushering them into extinction (Jonhera & Nyoni, 2023).

It is within this context that the researchers embarked on a language documentation fieldwork aimed at not only preserving the ChiBarwe language and culture but also providing the Launchpad for the revitalisation of the language. The motivation of this community engagement is supported by Bowern (2008), who avers that the endeavour of understanding and documenting a language often necessitates direct engagement with the communities that speak it. Such an engagement, known as linguistic fieldwork, formed the bedrock upon which detailed

descriptions of languages are built and linguistic theories are tested (Rozhanskiy, 2021). This aligns with the broader efforts to promote mother-tongue-based education (MTBE), as advocated by Bantu scholars such as Magwa (2021), Chimhundu (1993), and Prah (2012), who emphasise the pedagogical benefits of using learners' mother-tongue languages in education. It is upon this background that this study seeks to explore the linguistic fieldwork using ChiBarwe orthography development as a case study. Such an immersive methodology allowed researchers to gain authentic insights into the ChiBarwe phonemic inventory, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation as used in everyday conversation.

Objectives

This study seeks to:

- identify the fieldwork methodologies utilised in developing a comprehensive ChiBarwe orthography.
- examine the challenges encountered during linguistic fieldwork and explore the strategies employed to mitigate them.
- propose strategies for the implementation of the ChiBarwe orthography and the revitalisation of the language.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Language Standardisation Model (LSM) as refined by Ayres-Bennett (2020), which provides a structured approach to the development of functional and socially accepted writing systems. The LSM identifies a sequence of interrelated stages in standardisation, typically encompassing selection, codification, elaboration of function, and acceptance (Haugen, 1966; Ayres-Bennett, 2020). These stages ensure that standardisation is not merely a technical exercise in orthography design but also a sociolinguistic process that integrates community engagement, functional applicability, and cultural legitimacy. In the context of ChiBarwe, the LSM is particularly relevant because it recognises that linguistic decisions, such as grapheme choice or orthographic conventions, must be grounded in both structural linguistic evidence and the social realities of the speech community.

In this research, the selection stage involved identifying the dialectal base for the standard orthography, guided by both linguistic criteria and sociolinguistic considerations. Given the mutual intelligibility between ChiBarwe and ChiHwesa, the decision required careful balancing of identity politics with phonological representativeness. This aligns with the LSM's emphasis on deliberate choice of the form to be standardised, informed by fieldwork and consultation with native speakers (Ayres-Bennett, 2020). Codification, the second stage, entailed systematically representing ChiBarwe's phonemic inventory in written form, ensuring orthographic consistency and clarity. Here, the LSM's focus on technical accuracy dovetailed with best practices in orthography development, as discussed by Cahill and Karan (2008), who stress the importance of transparent sound-symbol correspondence for literacy acquisition.

The elaboration stage, as conceptualised in the LSM, involves extending the standard form to new functions and domains, ensuring it can serve a variety of communicative needs. In this study, elaboration was approached through the creation of literacy materials such as alphabet charts, folktales, and sample dialogues. These resources were designed to test the orthography's adaptability across genres and registers, reflecting Ayres-Bennett's (2020) assertion that functional expansion is critical for long-term viability. Acceptance, the final stage, was pursued through participatory validation workshops and pilot literacy testing. This resonates with the LSM's recognition that standardisation must be a collaborative process, where legitimacy is built through consensus and endorsement from both expert and lay stakeholders (Sebba, 2007). Through applying the LSM, this research not only followed a theoretically grounded process but also integrated iterative feedback loops between technical orthography design and community validation. The model's holistic perspective ensured that the proposed ChiBarwe writing system met the dual requirements of linguistic accuracy and sociocultural acceptability. In doing so, it provided a robust framework for navigating the challenges of dialectal variation, sociolinguistic identity, and literacy development. The adoption of the LSM in this context demonstrates its adaptability to African language standardisation processes, particularly in multilingual settings where political, cultural, and linguistic factors intersect.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, guided by the principles of linguistic fieldwork and language documentation. The primary objective was to develop a standard orthography for ChiBarwe through an interactive and participatory process. The methodology followed the three interrelated stages of orthography design, namely pre-fieldwork, fieldwork proper, and post-fieldwork, with an emphasis on immersion in the Barweland to collect both linguistic and sociolinguistic data relevant to the orthography development process. Before embarking on data collection, the principal researcher had the advantage of being a native ChiBarwe speaker. As Kadenge (2007) observes, there is an added advantage when a linguist researches a language they are familiar with, as such insider knowledge enables a deeper appreciation of grammatical patterns, phonological systems, and subtle sociolinguistic details. This positionality facilitated rapport with the community, enhanced access to participants, and enriched the interpretation of linguistic data. Scholars such as Chelliah and de Reuse (2021) further stress that insider status often strengthens reliability in linguistic documentation when balanced with reflexivity.

Data were collected using multiple methods to ensure triangulation and enhance reliability. In-depth interviews with elders, teachers, and community leaders were conducted to elicit perspectives on orthographic preferences, phonological representation, and spelling conventions. Questionnaires were distributed to a wider sample of speakers to capture attitudes toward existing draft orthographies and to gather data on literacy practices. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were employed to promote collective dialogue, particularly around contentious orthographic forms, and to allow for negotiation of community preferences, reflecting methodological recommendations by Denzin (2012), who emphasised the importance of triangulation for enhancing both validity and trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry. Elicitation techniques, including the use of the expanded Swadesh list for Bantu languages, were adopted to document phonemic inventories, lexical items, and grammatical structures systematically. In addition, the researchers analysed existing draft orthographies of ChiBarwe to identify gaps, inconsistencies, and areas in need of refinement. The combined use of these methods allowed for methodological triangulation, which Creswell and Poth (2018) argue is central to addressing validity concerns and achieving data saturation in qualitative research.

The study adopted a qualitative approach to data analysis, with field notes, transcriptions of interviews, and FGD recordings coded thematically. Patterns were identified in phoneme-grapheme correspondences, spelling practices, and community perceptions of orthographic legitimacy. Draft orthographies generated from the analysis were interactively validated with participants through workshops and follow-up interviews, ensuring that the process remained participatory and reflective of community needs. After validation by various stakeholders, necessary changes were effected, and the orthography proceeded to pilot testing in schools and communities across Barweland. The purpose of this pilot testing was to evaluate usability, assess pedagogical soundness, test learner comprehension, and determine community acceptance of the proposed writing system. Following pilot testing, the orthography underwent final validation before being prepared for publication as the definitive ChiBarwe orthography. Throughout the entire process, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), the Ministry of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MHTEISTD) served as the critical in-line ministries providing oversight and institutional legitimacy. This cyclical and institutionally anchored approach aligns with Seifart et al. (2018), who argue that orthography development must move beyond mere data collection to include iterative verification, community engagement, and institutional endorsement. By allowing constant refinement, the study ensured the production of an orthography that was both linguistically sound, socially acceptable, and officially recognised for long-term viability.

Ethical considerations were central to this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with oral consent sought in low-literacy contexts and, where necessary, supported by communal legitimacy through local elders. Participants were fully briefed on the aims of the study, their right to withdraw, and the intended use of the data, in line with guidelines by UNESCO (2021). Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participant data in field notes and publications. In addition, sensitivity to cultural protocols was observed, particularly in engaging elders and traditional leaders. As Bowern (2015) highlights, ethical transparency and cultural sensitivity are fundamental to linguistic fieldwork, ensuring that both community trust and scholarly integrity are upheld.

Background to the Analysis and Findings

ChiBarwe Language

ChiBarwe is a Bantu language of the Niger-Congo family, traditionally classified within Guthrie's (1967) classification, which places it in the class N40 group together with Nyungwe and Sena. (Mangoya, 2012 & Chirimaunga, 2013). ChiBarwe is popularly known as ChiHwesa in Zimbabwe and is spoken primarily in the northeastern parts of the Nyanga District, Manicaland Province, near the border with Mozambique. Specifically, ChiBarwe or ChiHwesa is mostly spoken under Chief Katerere, who is of the Hwesa totem. Therefore, the Katerere kingdom is considered to be the heart of ChiBarwe/ChiHwesa in Zimbabwe and is mainly referred to as '*ku*Hwesa' with the language mostly spoken in areas such as Fombe, Avilla, Kazozo, Ruwangwe, Kadzere, and Nyamahumba, among others (Ndhlovu, 2007 & Mangoya, 2012).

As noted by Hachipola (1998) and Magwa (2021), ChiBarwe is also spoken in areas beyond the jurisdiction of Chief Katerere, in areas such as in the Mudzi district. Having taken the position that ChiBarwe is also known as ChiHwesa, we also argue that this variety is composed of dialects that have not been studied and labelled since not much research has been carried out on the language. However, an archaic form of ChiBarwe is reportedly spoken in specific locations along the Gaerezi River, such as Mhanje, Khoso, Kaitano, Musambanyama, and Munzara (Chirimaunga, 2013 & Magwa, 2021). In Zimbabwe, ChiBarwe gained official recognition as one of Zimbabwe's Officially Recognised Languages (ZORLs) (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). This theoretically mandates impartial treatment of the language by the state and government institutions. Efforts are underway to promote and develop these officially recognised but historically marginalised languages, including their use in education and media. Despite its official recognition in Zimbabwe, ChiBarwe remains unwritten and under-documented, factors that pose significant challenges to its vitality.

The Motivation for ChiBarwe Orthography

In Zimbabwe, the development of a standard writing system for ChiBarwe is an urgent and necessary step toward the preservation and revitalisation of this endangered minority language. As noted by Mangoya (2012), ChiBarwe has suffered decades of marginalisation, resulting in a

declining number of fluent speakers, particularly among younger generations. The dominance of Shona and English in education, media, and government institutions has contributed to the endangerment of ChiBarwe from being a viable language of communication in all spheres of their lives (Chirimaunga, 2013). It is disheartening that over four decades after gaining political independence, ChiBarwe speakers are being 'forced' to learn Shona as their first language in schools, and it is the only examinable indigenous language by the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) in Mashonaland, including Barweland. Jonhera and Nyoni (2023) support this assertion when they say this 'Shonalisation' wave, particularly in schools and media, has contributed to the perpetuated marginalisation of ChiBarwe and glorifies the existence of Shona, one of the national languages in Zimbabwe. Given these dynamics, ChiBarwe faces the real threat of extinction if immediate intervention through documentation and standardisation is not undertaken. Therefore, a writing system then plays a crucial role in the survival of ChiBarwe as it facilitates literacy, cultural transmission, and intergenerational learning.

In the 21st Century, language resuscitation is a global movement aimed at restoring the use of endangered languages through documentation, education, and community mobilisation (Seifart, 2006). Developing a ChiBarwe orthography aligns with this movement by providing the foundational tools needed for teaching and learning the language. Once written, ChiBarwe can be introduced into schools, religious spaces, community literature, and media platforms. This can stimulate new language domains and encourage pride among ChiBarwe speakers. The success of such revitalisation efforts is contingent upon a user-friendly, culturally relevant, and linguistically accurate writing system developed in collaboration with the speech community. These efforts are complemented by Mutasa (2006) when he points out that the rights of the people to their language are critical, regardless of whether they are numerically small or large, since language is identity. Similarly, Magwa and Mutasa (2007) allude to the fact that many marginalised African languages are under siege from both the imported European languages and the majority of indigenous African languages.

Another compelling reason for developing a ChiBarwe writing system lies in the recognition of linguistic rights. Language is a core component of identity, and the ability to read and write in one's mother tongue is a fundamental human right (Dziva & Dube, 2014). Article

2 of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) asserts that all language communities have the right to codify, standardise, and use their language in public and private life (De Varennes, 2021). The lack of a ChiBarwe writing system limits access to this right and perpetuates systemic inequalities. By contrast, providing the ChiBarwe-speaking population with a standard orthography enables them to participate more fully in social, educational, and political processes. It affirms their identity and ensures their voices are represented in Zimbabwe's multicultural fabric. The rationale is further strengthened by the ongoing United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), which aims to draw global attention to the critical status of many of the world's minority languages (U.N. Secretariat, 2022). This initiative emphasises the documentation, preservation, and revitalisation of endangered languages as a means of safeguarding linguistic diversity and cultural heritage (Hutson, Ellsworth & Ellsworth, 2024). In this context, ChiBarwe becomes a test case for Zimbabwe's commitment to the UN's call for action. Zimbabwe can showcase its role in promoting sustainable multilingualism and inclusive national development, in line with international frameworks, by investing in the development of a ChiBarwe writing system.

From a policy perspective, the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe explicitly lists ChiBarwe as one of the sixteen Zimbabwe's Officially Recognised Languages (ZORLs). This official recognition, on paper, must be followed by meaningful implementation in which orthography development is foundational. Some of the other officially recognised indigenous languages, particularly Shona and Ndebele, already possess well-established writing systems and are used widely in education, media, and administration (Jonhera & Nyoni, 2023). Conversely, ChiBarwe remains underdeveloped in these domains due to the absence of an official orthography. Developing a standardised ChiBarwe writing system helps to close this gap and ensure that the constitutional promise of linguistic equality is realised. Moreover, Mudenda (2021) notes that the desire to uplift the minority language-in-education has been reflected in the Education Act Amended 2020, which made huge steps in mitigating the hegemonic influences of Shona in the country in languages that are supposed to be taught at schools. It stipulates that:

1. Every school shall endeavour to:
    (a) Teach every officially recognised language.

(b) Ensure that the language of instruction shall be the language of examination.

(c) Ensure that the mother tongue is to be used as a medium of instruction in early childhood education.

2. School curricula shall, as far as possible, reflect the culture of the people of every language used or taught in terms of this section.

3. The use of any language in terms of subsections (1) and (2) shall be subject to:

(a) The availability of resources to the State for giving effect to these provisions, and

(b) The availability of teachers, examiners, textbooks, and other educational materials is necessary for instruction in any of the languages.

(Education Act of Zimbabwe, 2020)

This 2020 amendment of the Education Act came after widespread disgruntlement from various sections of the Zimbabwean population, speaking and non-speaking these minority languages, to the discriminatory nature of the previous language-in-education policy, and also to place it in line with the 2013 Constitution's founding provisions (Chirimaunga, 2025). Consequently, subsection (1) of the 2020 Education Act amendment is a progressive attempt to include all officially recognised languages in schools, which is a commendable move by the government in combating linguistic hegemony. Thus, although aligned with the new constitution, the Education Act amendment (2020) still falls short of the expectations of the minority languages in that it has empowered government officials to use the 'lack of resources' excuse as a legal position to deny the minority languages an opportunity to develop and be introduced fully in education (Chirimaunga, 2025). Therefore, there is a pressing need to develop a comprehensive ChiBarwe orthography to provide the foundational linguistic tools necessary for its inclusion in education and literacy programmes. Without a standardised writing system, policy intentions remain unimplementable.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and analyses the findings of the study in line with the research objectives outlined in Section 2. Specifically, the study sought to (i) identify the fieldwork methodologies

utilised in developing a comprehensive ChiBarwe orthography, (ii) examine the challenges encountered during linguistic fieldwork and explore the strategies employed to mitigate them, and (iii) propose strategies for the implementation of the ChiBarwe orthography and the revitalisation of the language. The analysis is therefore organised thematically to ensure that each objective is adequately addressed. This approach provides clarity, coherence, and alignment between the stated goals of the research and the empirical data gathered, while also facilitating a systematic discussion of the linguistic and sociolinguistic dimensions of orthography development.

Fieldwork methodologies

The development of the ChiBarwe orthography was premised on the systematic adoption of rigorous linguistic fieldwork methodologies. In line with Seifart et al. (2018), who emphasise that orthography design must move beyond abstract theorisation to practical immersion in linguistic communities, this study adopted a combination of pre-fieldwork planning and fieldwork immersion as central methodological pillars. Before data collection began, the principal researcher's positionality as a native ChiBarwe speaker proved an asset. Kadenge (2007) argues that insider knowledge enables the researcher to detect subtle phonological contrasts and sociolinguistic details that outsiders may overlook. This positionality not only enhanced linguistic sensitivity but also facilitated rapport with participants, who often remarked during interviews that one of our own is the right person to help us write our language properly. Such insider trust was particularly important in encouraging open participation, especially in rural communities where suspicion of outsiders is common.

Pre-fieldwork preparations involved an extensive review of previous draft orthographies and related documentation for Bantu languages, alongside the design of instruments such as interview schedules, questionnaires, and elicitation wordlists. The expanded Swadesh list for Bantu languages was adapted to suit ChiBarwe phonological and lexical patterns, thereby allowing systematic collection of core vocabulary. As Chelliah and Reuse (2020) suggest, effective fieldwork requires a balance between structured elicitation and naturalistic observation, ensuring that the data collected reflect both controlled environments and authentic language use. To this effect, the study incorporated spontaneous speech recordings from

marketplaces and social gatherings, which complemented formal interviews by capturing natural communicative patterns. Participants often expressed pride in their everyday language use. Such data reinforced the need for an orthography grounded in lived language practices rather than purely theoretical abstractions.

During the fieldwork proper, multiple tools were deployed to ensure triangulation and strengthen reliability. In-depth interviews with community elders, teachers, and cultural custodians provided insights into phonological representation and orthographic preferences. For instance, elders insisted on the importance of accurately representing vowel length contrasts, which they felt were central to meaning distinctions. Questionnaires distributed to younger ChiBarwe speakers revealed patterns of literacy practices and attitudes towards previous attempts at orthography development, with many respondents highlighting difficulties in distinguishing certain digraphs, trigraphs, and quadrigraphs. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were particularly effective in stimulating debate around contentious graphemes. In one FGD, participants engaged in an animated discussion over whether "zv" and "bzv" should be represented distinctly, demonstrating the value of participatory methodologies in negotiating orthographic consensus. These varied data sources were systematically triangulated, following the argument by Denzin (2012) that the use of multiple instruments increases both validity and reliability in qualitative research.

Elicitation methods provided further systematic documentation of ChiBarwe phonology and lexicon. Participants were asked to pronounce items from the expanded Swadesh list, while the researchers recorded phonetic variations. This method was particularly useful in mapping dialectal differences between speakers from Gaerezi and Ruwangwe. Observational notes revealed subtle sociophonetic variations, such as the tendency of younger speakers to adopt Shona-influenced forms in urbanised settings, which highlighted the dynamic interplay between ChiBarwe and dominant languages. As Obiero (2010) observes in his work on minority language documentation, capturing such variation is critical in preventing orthographies from fossilising one variety at the expense of others. Moreover, oral literature, including folktales and songs, was documented to capture prosodic patterns and culturally embedded metaphors. A participant in Nyamagoromondo narrated the folktale of *"Suro naMutiro"* 'Hare and Baboon',

and the recording of the performance illustrated how intonation, rhythm, and formulaic expressions could inform orthographic decisions.

Taken together, the combination of pre-fieldwork preparation, immersion in Barweland, and methodological triangulation provided a robust foundation for orthography development. The participatory nature of the methodologies ensured that the emerging orthography was not merely a linguistic artefact imposed from above, but rather a reflection of community realities and preferences. Using diverse tools ranging from structured elicitation to spontaneous speech and oral literature, the study not only documented ChiBarwe's phonemic inventory and lexicon but also incorporated sociolinguistic insights that enhanced the usability and legitimacy of the orthography. In this way, the methodological approach responded directly to the objective of identifying fieldwork methodologies and demonstrated the value of integrating linguistic expertise with community-driven validation.

Challenges Encountered and Mitigation Strategies

As noted by Bowern (2008), linguistic fieldwork is frequently confronted with a wide range of challenges. Similarly, the process of developing the ChiBarwe orthography presented logistical, sociolinguistic, methodological, and ethical difficulties that required adaptive strategies. One of the main challenges in the ChiBarwe orthography fieldwork was dialectal variation. Speakers along the Gaerezi River and in Ruwangwe showed subtle but consistent phonological differences, making consensus on standard forms contentious. For example, prenasalisation of consonants (e.g., pf vs. mpf, ts vs. nts, psv vs. mpsv) and the /ndw/ cluster, often realised as /-iw-/ in passive verbs, e.g., *pendiwa* for *pendwa* 'be painted', varied across regions and age groups. Opinions differed on whether distinct graphemes were needed or if a single representation sufficed, as some dialects neutralised these contrasts. Lexical preferences also varied, with certain words linked to cultural identity, making orthographic choices politically sensitive. To address this, the team used comparative analysis to identify shared phonological patterns and conducted community workshops to negotiate grapheme choices, fostering consensus, reducing tensions, and promoting shared ownership of the orthography.

This dialectal variation extended beyond phonology to lexical preferences, with certain words for everyday objects differing across regions. While some respondents regarded these

differences as trivial, others linked them to cultural identity, making orthographic compromise politically charged. Chelliah and Reuse (2020) emphasise that such dialectal diversity complicates standardisation, often requiring compromise and transparency. To mitigate this, the research team employed comparative analysis across dialects and prioritised graphemes that represented shared phonological patterns. Community workshops were then used to negotiate these choices, with one participant asserting: *"Kana tikaseenzesa bzvamunada imwepa wakuGaerezi, bzvinanga bzvisiri bzvakwathu kuRuwangwe."* 'If we only use what you from Gaerezi prefer, then it will not reflect our Ruwangwe variety. These participatory forums helped to defuse tensions and promote a sense of shared ownership.

A second challenge related to sociolinguistic identities and language politics, particularly the tension between ChiBarwe and ChiHwesa name tags. On purely linguistic grounds, the two varieties share almost identical phonemic inventories, making it difficult to draw a watertight distinction. However, participants from the Hwesa community resisted the term "ChiBarwe," associating it with Barwe District in Mozambique and derogatory stereotypes, especially of poverty and backwardness. During FGDs, Hwesa speakers frequently emphasised their preference for "ChiHwesa" as a label of identity, even though their linguistic forms were mutually intelligible with ChiBarwe. This reflects Fishman's (1991) observation that language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a marker of identity and power relations. To navigate this tension, the researchers foregrounded linguistic underpinnings rather than sociopolitical labels, while still acknowledging the sensitivities of Hwesa participants. Workshops deliberately avoided framing the language choice in exclusionary terms, focusing instead on "shared patterns" of sounds and spelling. While this did not fully resolve the socio-political disputes, it enabled progress towards orthographic consensus by shifting attention from contested identities to practical linguistic representation.

Another challenge was low literacy levels in rural communities, which complicated the processes of data elicitation and consent. Many participants in the Munzara and Chabundo areas had limited familiarity with formal research protocols, and written consent forms were often misunderstood. As UNESCO (2021) stresses, informed consent in low-literacy contexts must be culturally adapted to ensure genuine participation. In this study, verbal consent was sought, with elders co-signing decisions to legitimise participation. Similarly, elicitation tasks such as

wordlists or dictation exercises had to be simplified to match participants' literacy levels. One teacher in Kazozo remarked during piloting that *"wenango wanapusa kuyerenga asi waribe kujaira kunyorha kwamutauro wathuyu"* 'some of our people can read, but they are not used to writing this language'. To address this, the researchers used oral literature, songs, and folktales to capture data in contexts where literacy was not a barrier, a strategy consistent with Grenoble and Whaley's (2006) call to adapt methods to community realities.

Logistical constraints also presented significant hurdles. Fieldwork was conducted in geographically remote areas with poor infrastructure, making travel and communication difficult. Many ChiBarwe-speaking communities are located in remote areas such as Fombe, Chapatarongo, and Kadzere, where infrastructure is underdeveloped. Accessing these sites often involved navigating poor road networks, unreliable transport, and long travel times, especially during the rainy season. As Brickell (2018) highlights, remoteness necessitates careful planning and extended stays to optimise data collection. In our experience, partnering with local leaders and language coordinators proved crucial. Motorbikes and extended village stays allowed deeper engagement with speakers, consistent with Thieberger and Berez (2017), who advocate immersive approaches in under-documented languages.

Language shift, particularly among youth in areas, such as Ruwangwe, presented a significant sociolinguistic challenge. The increasing dominance of Shona and English in schools, media, and everyday communication has created noticeable intergenerational gaps, with younger speakers often exhibiting limited proficiency in ChiBarwe. This trend not only complicates linguistic documentation but also threatens the long-term vitality of the language (Hinton et al., 2018). Many youths struggled to recall certain words, idiomatic expressions, or subtle phonological distinctions, which are crucial for developing a robust orthography. To mitigate this, younger participants were deliberately paired with fluent elders during elicitation sessions. This pairing served a dual purpose: it ensured linguistic accuracy and facilitated the transmission of cultural knowledge embedded in language use. One youth participant remarked, *"Ndiri kufunda mazwi matsva kubva kuna sekuru, uye zvinoita kuti ndide mutauro wedu."* 'I am learning new words from my grandfather, and it makes me love our language.' Elders, in turn, expressed satisfaction that younger generations were actively engaging with their heritage. This intergenerational model echoes the findings of Bavin and Osborn (2020), who highlight

that such collaborative approaches not only enhance data collection but also foster language revitalisation and strengthen community identity.

A final but equally significant challenge was the negotiation of authority between academic experts and community stakeholders. Linguists involved in validation workshops often pushed for phonemic precision, while community members prioritised usability and simplicity. This tension reflects Sebba's (2007) observation that orthography design is not purely a linguistic exercise but a sociopolitical negotiation where competing interests must be balanced. In one validation session, an elder insisted: *"Tinada kunyora bzvidadonhae, kuti wana wathu wareke kugunda kuyerenga"* 'We want simple writing so that our children will not struggle to read', directly challenging the linguists' preference for graphemic distinctions. To reconcile these divergent positions, the team adopted a participatory approach that gave equal weight to technical accuracy and community usability. This echoes the Language Standardisation Model (Ayres-Bennett, 2020), which emphasises iterative dialogue between experts and speakers as a pathway to durable acceptance of orthographies.

Overall, the challenges encountered during ChiBarwe orthography development emphasise the complexity of linguistic fieldwork in multilingual and politically charged contexts. However, by employing strategies such as comparative analysis, participatory validation workshops, culturally sensitive consent procedures, and creative logistical adaptations, the research team was able to mitigate these barriers. Crucially, the use of methodological triangulation ensured that findings were not undermined by any single limitation, while continuous dialogue with stakeholders reinforced the legitimacy of the process. This reflects the argument by Seifart et al. (2018) that orthography development is as much about navigating social realities as it is about linguistic description.

Strategies for Implementation and Revitalisation of the ChiBarwe Orthography

The successful development of an orthography is only the first step toward language revitalisation. For ChiBarwe, the long-term viability of the orthography depends on effective implementation across educational, cultural, and digital platforms. As Bamgbose (1991) argues, orthographies achieve legitimacy when they are widely taught, published, and used in official

and informal domains. In the case of ChiBarwe, participants consistently emphasised the importance of integrating the orthography into schools, particularly in areas such as Kadzere and Ruwangwe, where the language is widely spoken. Teachers suggested that primers, readers, and supplementary materials be developed for early childhood education. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) was identified as a critical stakeholder for embedding ChiBarwe literacy in the curriculum, aligning with Zimbabwe's Education Act (2020), which supports the teaching of minority languages.

Beyond education, revitalisation requires active community engagement to ensure intergenerational transmission of the language. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) stress that community buy-in is the most decisive factor in language survival. In this study, respondents highlighted the importance of using ChiBarwe in cultural domains such as folktales, songs, and traditional ceremonies. Elders advocated for the documentation of oral literature in the newly standardised orthography to safeguard cultural heritage while simultaneously promoting literacy. The Ministry of Sports, Arts and Recreation, as well as the Department of Curriculum Development and Technical Services (CDTS), were therefore identified as key partners in bridging literacy and culture by funding and supporting projects that embed the orthography into everyday cultural practices.

Digitalisation also emerged as an important strategy for ChiBarwe's revitalisation. Youth participants noted that for a language to thrive, it must adapt to new digital spaces such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok. This aligns with recent scholarship by Makhachashvili, Kovpik, and Bakhtina (2024), who argue that digital media provides unprecedented opportunities for minority languages to expand their presence and vitality. The inclusion of ChiBarwe keyboards, predictive text systems, and digital storybooks in e-learning platforms was recommended by both teachers and young participants. These insights point towards the role of digital humanities initiatives in ensuring that ChiBarwe literacy is not confined to classrooms but becomes part of everyday communication among younger generations.

Another strategy lies in institutional support and policy alignment. Obiero (2010) stresses that without state recognition and resourcing, minority language orthographies often remain symbolic rather than functional. The ChiBarwe orthography project benefited from recognition in the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), which listed ChiBarwe as one of the

officially recognised languages. However, sustained implementation requires coordinated action across ministries. In addition to MoPSE and the Ministry of Sports, Arts and Recreation, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MHTEISTD) must take a leading role in producing ChiBarwe teaching materials, training teachers, and funding university-based research into the language. The endorsement and involvement of these ministries would strengthen the legitimacy of the orthography and ensure continuity across primary, secondary, and tertiary education systems.

Crucially, pilot testing in schools and communities provided evidence of the orthography's usability and long-term viability. Through literacy sessions involving alphabet charts, folktales, and dictation tasks, participants highlighted graphemes that were intuitive and those that required refinement. As Frawley (2003) argues, pilot testing bridges theory and practice, revealing how abstract orthographic decisions function in real literacy contexts. The iterative process of revising and re-validating the orthography after pilot testing ensured that the final version was linguistically accurate, pedagogically sound, and socially acceptable. Importantly, this process generated enthusiasm within the community, with teachers reporting heightened interest in developing ChiBarwe reading clubs and adult literacy programmes. Such excitement highlights the broader revitalisation potential of the orthography, since motivation is a key driver of language use in both formal and informal settings.

Finally, revitalisation strategies must consider the sociopolitical dynamics of identity. As noted in section 7.2, tensions between ChiBarwe and ChiHwesa identities complicated acceptance of the orthography. While the Constitution recognises ChiBarwe, Hwesa speakers continue to resist the label due to its association with Mozambique. To address this, the researchers emphasised inclusivity by framing the orthography as a shared linguistic resource rather than a tool of exclusion. This strategy resonates with Hornberger and King's (1998) idea of "continua of biliteracy," which highlights the need for flexibility in standardisation to accommodate diverse identities. The project fostered a sense of shared ownership, even among groups resistant to the ChiBarwe label, by engaging Hwesa communities in validation and pilot testing. Taken together, these strategies highlight that orthography development is not an end in itself but a foundation for language revitalisation. The project seeks to ensure both functional literacy and intergenerational transmission by embedding ChiBarwe in schools, cultural

practices, digital platforms, and policy frameworks. The combination of community participation, institutional support, and interactive validation underlines the argument of Seifart et al. (2018) that sustainable orthographies must be co-created by both experts and speakers, rooted in local realities while projecting into future domains of use.

Conclusion

This study examined the development of a standard ChiBarwe orthography through linguistic fieldwork guided by the Language Standardisation Model (Ayres-Bennett, 2020). Objective one showed that immersion in the Barweland, supported by interviews, questionnaires, FGDs, and elicitation, provided reliable linguistic data, with methodological triangulation and the insider positionality of the researcher strengthening validity. Objective two revealed that dialectal variation and tensions between ChiBarwe and ChiHwesa identities complicated orthographic choices, yet validation workshops and community dialogue enabled compromise in line with best practices (Chelliah & Reuse, 2020). Objective three demonstrated that sustainable implementation requires integration into schools, cultural practices, and digital platforms, with pilot testing confirming usability and acceptance. Institutional support from MoPSE, the Ministry of Sports, Arts and Recreation, and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development was critical in legitimising the process. Overall, the study affirms that orthography development is both a linguistic and sociocultural process, and its success depends on balancing technical accuracy with community ownership.

REFERENCES

Apriyani, D., & Ayuningrum, H. (2024). The effectiveness of field work practices on students' readiness to face the business and industrial worlds. In *5th Vocational Education International Conference (VEIC-5 2023)* (pp. 205–214). Atlantis Press.

Austin, P.K. (2016). *Language documentation and linguistic theory*. SOAS.

Austin, P.K., & Grenoble, L. A. (2022). *Doing linguistic fieldwork: A guide for students*. Cambridge University Press.

Bavin, E., & Osborn, R. (2020). *Revitalising Indigenous languages: Strategies and challenges*. Routledge.

Bernard, H.R. (2011). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.). AltaMira Press.

Bowern, C. (2015). *Linguistic fieldwork: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bowern, C. (2023). *Linguistic fieldwork: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Brickell, T.C. (2018). Linguistic fieldwork: Perception, preparation, and practice. *Language Documentation and Description, 15.*

Cameron, D. (1992). *Feminism and linguistic theory* (2nd ed.). Macmillan.

Chelliah, S.L., & de Reuse, W.J. (2011). *Handbook of descriptive linguistic fieldwork*. Springer.

Chelliah, S.L., & Reuse, W. J. (2020). *Handbook of descriptive linguistic fieldwork*. Springer.

Chimhundu, H. (1993). The vernacularization of African languages after independence. *Diogenes, 41*(161), 35–42.

Chirimaunga, T. (2013). *Shona influence on Hwesa lexicon* (Master's thesis).

Chirimaunga, T. (2025). Morphological causatives in ChiBarwe: An LMT analysis. *Journal of Linguistics & Language in Education, 19*(1).

Chirimaunga, T. (2025). Language-in-education policies and minority language resuscitation efforts in Zimbabwe. In *Resuscitation of African languages: Theorising the battle against sociocultural genocide* (pp. 167–192). Springer Nature Switzerland.

Crowley, T, & Thieberger, N. (2007). *Field linguistics: A beginner's guide*. Oxford University Press.

Czaykowska-Higgins, E. (2009). Research models, community engagement, and linguistic fieldwork: Reflections on working within Canadian Indigenous communities. *Language Documentation & Conservation, 3*(1), 15–50.

De Varennes, F. (2021). *Language, minorities and human rights* (Vol. 45). Brill.

Doke, C.M. (1931). *Report on the unification of the Shona dialects*. Stephen Austin.

Dziva, C., & Dube, B. (2014). Promoting and protecting minority languages in Zimbabwe: Use of the 1992 UN Minorities Declaration. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights, 21*(3), 395–413.

Dwyer, A.M. (2006). Ethics and practicalities of cooperative fieldwork and analysis. In J. Gippert, N. P. Himmelmann, & U. Mosel (Eds.), *Essentials of language documentation* (pp. 31–66). Mouton de Gruyter.

Everett, D.L. (2006). Coherent fieldwork. In *Linguistics today – Facing a greater challenge* (pp. 141–162). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Grenoble, L.A., & Furbee, N. L. (Eds.). (2010). *Language documentation: Practice and values*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Grenoble, L.A., & Osipov, V. (2023). *Ethical issues in language documentation and revitalisation*. Oxford University Press.

Hachipola, S.J. (1998). *Survey of the minority languages of Zimbabwe*. University of Zimbabwe Publications.

Haukås, Å., & Broch, I. M. (2021). Ethical reflexivity in multilingual research. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 18*(3), 321–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2020.1799206

Henderson, J. (2021). Communication tools in rural fieldwork. *Journal of Field Linguistics, 10*(2), 147–164.

Himmelmann, N.P. (2019). Data quality in documentation. *Language Documentation and Description, 16,* 11–28.

Hinton, L., Huss, L., & Roche, G. (Eds.). (2018). *The Routledge handbook of language revitalisation*. Routledge.

Hutson, J., Ellsworth, P., & Ellsworth, M. (2024). Preserving linguistic diversity in the digital age: A scalable model for cultural heritage continuity. *Journal of Contemporary Language Research, 3*(1).

Jonhera, T, & Nyoni, T. (2023). Linguistic hegemony and the minority languages battle for the Zimbabwean broadcasting space: A case of ZBC Television and National FM. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 7*(4), 1178–1195.

Linguistic Society of America. (2023). *Ethical principles for linguistic research.* https://www.linguisticsociety.org

Magwa, W. (2021). Language policy and practice in Zimbabwe. In W. Magwa, V. Jenjekwa, & M. Moyo (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and multilingual education in Zimbabwe* (pp. 123–145). Midlands State University Press.

Magwa, W., & Mutasa, D. E. (2007). Language and development: Perspectives from Sub-Saharan Africa. *NAWA Journal of Language & Communication, 1*(1).

Mangoya, E., & Ngunga, A. (2013). Segmental phonology of Barwe with some articulatory phonetics (Doctoral dissertation).

Martinsuo, M., & Huemann, M. (2021). Designing case study research. *International Journal of Project Management, 39*(5), 417–421.

Mudenda, A. (2021). Selective inclusion: Pertinent issues in the teaching of the Tonga language in Zimbabwe. In W. Magwa, V. Jenjekwa, & M. Moyo (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and multilingual education in Zimbabwe* (pp. 123–145). Midlands State University Press.

Mudzudza, S. (2016). *Hwesa alphabet – Beira Convention* (Unpublished manuscript).

Mutasa, D.E. (Ed.). (2006). *African languages in the 21st century: The main challenges*. Simba Guru Publishers.

Nathan, D. (2021). Principles of good practice for data in language documentation. *Language Documentation and Description, 20,* 34–53.

Ndhlovu, F. (2008). Language and African development: Theoretical reflections on the place of languages in African studies. *Nordic Journal of African Studies, 17,* 137–151.

Nhongo, R., & Tshotsho, B. P. (2021). The problematics of language-in-education policies in post-independence Zimbabwe. *Journal of Asian and African Studies, 56*(6), 1304–1317.

Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Prah, K.K. (2012). The language of development and the development of language in contemporary Africa. *Applied Linguistics Review, 3*(2), 295–313.

Rice, K. (2017). Ethical issues in linguistic fieldwork: An overview. *Language and Linguistics Compass, 11*(3). https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12234

Rozhanskiy, F. (2021). *A manual of linguistic fieldwork*.

Seifart, F. (2006). Orthography development. In J. Gippert, N. P. Himmelmann, & U. Mosel (Eds.), *Essentials of language documentation* (pp. 275–299). Mouton de Gruyter.

Seifart, F., Evans, N., Himmelmann, N. P., & Klamer, M. (2018). Language documentation twenty-five years on. *Language, 94*(4), e324–e345. https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2018.0071

Secretariat, U.N. (2022). *International Decade of Indigenous Languages, 2022–2032: Global action plan*.

SIL International. (2022). *Guidelines for ethical language development and research*.

Stevano, S., & Deane, K. (2019). The role of research assistants in qualitative and cross-cultural social science research. In *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1675–1690). Springer.

UNESCO. (2021). *Ethical research with Indigenous peoples and communities*. UNESCO.

Vaux, B., & Cooper, J. (1999). *Introduction to linguistic field methods*. LINCOM Europa.

Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency. (2022). *Zimbabwe population and housing census 2022: Preliminary report*. ZIMSTAT. https://www.zimstat.co.zw