SWAHILI FORUM 31 (2024): 37-57

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND SEXUALITY: SWAHILI LINGUISTIC PRACTICES AMONG SELF-IDENTIFIED GAY MEN IN DAR ES SALAAM

VINCENZO STRAFACE

This study examines linguistic practices, etymology, and evolving lexicon trends related to self-identification among Swahili speaking gay men and same-sex relationships. Based on personal interviews conducted between October and November 2022 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the research explores how language adapts and innovates when discussing taboo subjects. It emphasizes language's crucial role in reflecting and shaping identities in urban Sub-Saharan Africa, offering insights into how marginalized communities creatively use language to articulate their experiences amidst societal norms and pressures. This preliminary study highlights the need for further research in the field of Lavender Linguistics, especially with regard to Swahili and other Sub-Saharan African languages.

Introduction

How does the urban milieu of Dar es Salaam[1], Tanzania, shape the lexicon and linguistic expressions used by self-identified gay men, specifically in the context of expressing their identity and discussing sexuality? What are the predominant linguistic and social obstacles encountered by gay men in Dar es Salaam within the larger societal framework?

This study scrutinizes the pivotal role of linguistic practices and expressions used by self-identified gay men, particularly with regard to the role of *Lugha ya mitaani* (LyM)—a slang that not only challenges established linguistic norms but also demands nuanced semantic analysis for a profound comprehension.[2] In this research endeavour, I uncover layers to expose the linguistic identities meticulously crafted by self-identified gay men, delving into ongoing cultural shifts vividly reflected in the vocabulary they employ. Beyond the well-trodden paths of

[1] The urban milieu can be defined as the specific social and cultural environment that characterizes urban dynamics in different contexts. Paul Ruiz's work (2012) highlights how the social, economic, and political drivers of urbanism have shaped contemporary notions of gay identity, transforming urban spaces into hubs of social, cultural, and political utility for LGBT individuals. In this context, the city provides a safe and anonymous refuge where marginalized communities can thrive and define their identity. In a more detailed exploration of a specific area, Kiessling & Mous (2004) examine Nairobi's urban milieu through the lens of youth language and emerging cultural identities. They describe how Sheng, the street slang of Nairobi's Eastlands quarter, emerged as a form of youth identity blending lexical elements from Swahili, English, Kikuyu, and Dholuo. This phenomenon reflects the urban environment characterized by rapid expansion, ethnic diversity, and immigration during colonial times. In both cases, as also in this paper, the urban milieu represents more than just a physical backdrop: it serves as a fertile ground where social, cultural, and linguistic identities develop and are defined through complex interactions between individuals and urban spaces.

[2] The term *Lugha ya Mitaani* (LyM) was introduced by Uta Reuster-Jahn & Roland Kießling (2006), who categorise it as a style of speaking that lies between a sociolect and a register of Swahili used in Tanzania (2006: 2). They emphasise that LyM should not be understood as an independent language but rather as a variation of Swahili strategically employed in specific informal settings (ibid.). According to the authors "Swahili slang" was first documented by R.H. Gower in 1958. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's economic and cultural capital, is "the centre and hub of LyM, where its creation, dissemination and rejuvenation takes place" (Reuster-Jahn & Kießling 2022: 167).

Swahili linguistics, this preliminary exploration opens novel avenues, casting a spotlight on hitherto understudied dimensions: lavender linguistics in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Rudwick (2010) defines lavender linguistics as the study of communicative practices and languages within the LGBTQ+ community. The term 'lavender' has longstanding associations with same-sex desires, practices, and social statuses across various traditions (Leap, 2015), underscoring the global presence of such language practices, evident in examples like Polari in Great Britain, Swardspeak in the Philippines, Kaliarda in Greece, Bajubá in Brazil, Lubunca in Turkey, and both Gayle and isiNgqumo in South Africa (Luyt, 2014).

Richardson (2016) argues that self-acceptance of one's sexuality leads to personal growth and identity evolution, influencing language and communication patterns. This acceptance often fosters the development of gay slang as a significant medium for expressing identity. Building upon Richardson's theoretical framework, this article presents a case study in Dar es Salaam, where self-identified gay men between the ages of 20 and 35 play a crucial role in shaping local linguistic practices.

After detailing the methodology employed in my fieldwork, this article begins with an analysis of the term *dondoandume*, a word recently coined by BAKITA (*Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa*, engl. National Swahili Council) to project social stigma and label individuals through negative connotations. Subsequently, the study examines how activists[3] in my research self-identify, followed by an etymological inquiry into these terms. Lastly, the article explores the domain of sexuality, where a diachronic study reveals how individuals mould language and imbue existing words with new meanings, aiming to mitigate the stigma surrounding discussions of same-sex attraction.

Fieldwork methodology

Prior to addressing the primary focus of this study, it is essential to explicate the methodological framework utilized during my fieldwork[4] and elucidate the specific terminological choices employed in this paper. The research adopts a predominantly descriptive approach aimed at providing a comprehensive and precise account of the experiences and perspectives of activists. This methodology effectively captures the nuanced social issues central to the study, facilitating a

[3] Liselot Casteleyn claimed: "*Because the domination of 'the researcher' in opposition to 'the researched' overlooks the latter's active role in shaping an interview, I refer to the so-called 'respondents' of my research as 'LGBTQ activits'. This follows the idea of their voices and stories being vital to this dissertation and the information it produces*" (Casteleyn, 2019). In line with the statement above, the term 'activist/s' will be used to refer to people who have supplied me with information pertaining to the subject matter of this research.

[4] The fieldwork cited is part of my Master thesis entitled "*Unajitambulisha vipi? Mimi ni gay: fieldwork on homoerotic desire in Dar es Salaam*" (Straface 2023). It involved the participation of individuals who identify as queer, gay, and *shoga* (as explored in the present study). This two-month field research and data collection, conducted in October and November 2022, falls within the framework of the international cooperation agreement between the University of Naples "L'Orientale", where the thesis was defended, and the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM).

thorough thematic analysis of the data to discern key themes and linguistic phenomena arising from these perspectives.

Sampling strategies included purposive sampling targeting self-identified gay men aged 20-35 and snowball sampling to access subpopulations through existing networks, reaching a total of 22 participants in the interviews and many others contributing through informal conversations during participant observation. The lexicon for this research was gathered through five distinct methods: literature review (comprising an examination of articles, books, and papers on the topic), preliminary research (utilizing the dating app PlanetRomeo to gain an initial impression of the environment in Dar es Salaam)[5], questionnaires and interviews (with the former available in both English and Swahili versions, employed in semi-structured interviews conducted in English, with the a section conducted in Swahili for translating English words related to sex, desire, and identity), participatory observation (informal conversations and social media), and the utilization of dating apps and social media (primarily Grindr, Tinder, Instagram, and Telegram).

In particular, the questionnaire (see appendix) was structured into distinct categories to enhance comprehension and processing of responses: the initial four questions pertain to general information, aiming to encourage spontaneous communication; questions five through fourteen address topics such as coming out, experiences of being a gay/bi/queer man in the city of Dar es Salaam, the utilization of dating apps, and encounters with homophobia; the final two questions focus specifically on linguistic aspects. The penultimate question solicits any linguistic contributions in Swahili, whether a word or phrase, that are commonly used among gay men, while the last question introduces a sort of linguistic game. In this segment, I presented a selection of four or five English words on paper cards to the activist, who then attempted to translate one or more of these words into Swahili orally, using standard language or any form of slang. There was no limitation on the number of translations, encouraging multiple interpretations for the same word. Notably, the set of words used during fieldwork varied, as it became clear after numerous interviews that certain terms lacked corresponding Swahili translations due to their frequent usage in English. Ethical considerations were addressed through bilingual consent forms, ensuring participants' rights were respected (especially anonymity) throughout the research process.

It is important to note that the results, though valid and effective, cannot be generalized to the entire population of self-identified gay men in the city, and the scope of the research was limited by my short stay in Dar es Salaam. These findings are of a preliminary nature and serve to complement the investigation conducted via literature sources.

[5] PlanetRomeo offers the "Travel" feature that allows the user to connect with other people in different cities around the world quickly and easily, while this is not possible in other gay dating apps such as Grindr, where you can use the "Explore" feature but your profile will not be visible to other people and there is a daily limit of profiles you can unlock in other parts of the world, not exceeding three.

Lastly, it is crucial to emphasize that throughout the entirety of this paper, the term "gay" will be used to denote a sexual orientation, especially as it was the main term the activists used to self-identify themself when communicating with me. This emphasis is employed to clarify and distinguish this concept from the Swahili terms *gai*, *gehi*, or *gei* (pl. *magei*), which are embedded in Swahili discourse to signify the penetrated or passive role in a sexual context, colloquially known as the "bottom" (in contrast to the "top", representing the penetrating role).[6] This distinction is crucial for avoiding any potential confusion and aligns with the terminology conventions outlined by the study of Kåre Moen & al. (2014).

Dondoandume: A new word or a new stigma?

Starting from a thoroughly contemporary context, and even before embarking on a subsequent diachronic analysis, I will begin by discussing a specific term that captured my attention during my stay in Dar es Salaam. This particular term came to my notice on October 21st, 2022, through a noteworthy post on BAKITA's Instagram and Twitter channels that featured the creation of a new term, namely *dondoandume*.[7] The newly coined term was accompanied by the following definition: "*Mwanaume ambaye hupendelea kufanya mambo ya kike*", which translates into English as "A man who usually likes to do feminine things".[8] The caption of the post read, "*Mfano: dondoandume hapendwi na jamii*", meaning "Example: a *dondoandume* is not loved by society" (Figure 1).

[6] Often, in a sexual relationship, only the penetrated partner is considered homosexual while the penetrator is considered a "real man", and his masculinity will not be disputed. This conception obviously also falls on the linguistic level where *shoga* (primarily denoting a female best friend of a woman) is the impotent man who has the role of the passive partner. In contrast, *basha*, a term derived from Persian *pasha* (a term also denoting the King in a deck of playing cards), is the one who has the role of "active, top" in sexual intercourse, who in the social context has no labelling to coincide with that of homosexual. The bottom guy is often not only considered homosexual but will also have a very low social role, often inferior to that of women. Moreover, according to Gill Shepherd (1987), the top man can have sex with a boy (usually younger) and at the same time have a wife. A homosexual man will be labelled *shoga* only when he is not married and has an exclusive interest in men.

[7] BAKITA's missions are: 1. To efficiently manage and coordinate the development and use of Kiswahili in Tanzania 2. To participate fully and effectively in promoting Kiswahili in East Africa, Africa and the entire world over (https://www.bakita.go.tz/eng/vision_mission). In addition, on its social channels of Twitter and Instagram, posts are published about every two days that analyse a little-known word from the Kiswahili daily lexicon by giving its a meaning, as in the case exemplified here. https://twitter.com/bakitatz; https://www.instagram.com/bakita_tz/

[8] All translation from Swahili into English are by the author.

Figure 1: *Screenshot of BAKITA post on Instagram.*

From a linguistic perspective, the analysis of the word *dondoandume* reveals two separate lexical items: the verb *-dondoa* and the noun *ndume*. Conducting a brief etymological study, using different dictionaries[9], it can be hypothesized that the term *dondoandume* may convey, in a literal sense, two distinct concepts. The first concept relates to the systematic removal of male essence and characteristics from a man, while the second potential interpretation involves causing harm to the male aspect, particularly masculinity, resulting in wounds that gradually diminish its virility. Notably, the significance of the term *ndume*, as documented in both Krapf and TUKI, where it is translated as "rice", becomes evident once more during interviews with activists: in this context, the words *mchele* and *bwabwa*, both used to identify a gay man, denote "overcooked rice", used derogatorily to characterize gay men as weak and incomplete (see Table 1).

The case of the creation of this new term, *dondoandume*, provides a poignant illustration of how linguistic expressions play a role in perpetuating and reflecting societal attitudes towards male homosexuality in this challenging environment, where the criminalization of homosexuality persists,[10] fostering an environment where homophobic sentiments are deeply rooted in

[9] Specifically: Krapf L., 1882; Madan A.C., 1903; Ohly R., 1987; Rechenbach C.W., 1967; TUKI online dictionary, 2011 (available online: https://swahili-dictionary.com/swahili-english)

[10] Analyzing the Tanzanian Constitution, we observe that both the Swahili and English versions, specifically under Article 9 in Part II addressing "Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy", do not explicitly include references to sexual orientation or gender identity as criteria for citizens entitled to equal opportunities. However, when examining the Swahili terms *wake* and *waume* within the same article, conventionally translated as "women" and "men", there is an implicit suggestion of adherence to heterosexual social roles. This

most parts of society and in everyday language use. However, comments on the post across both platforms (Twitter and Instagram) indicate some resistance. Various users responded with laughing emojis or remarks like "*Mambo ya kike ni yapi hayo?*" (engl. "What are those feminine things?"), indicating, as pointed out by one of the interviewed activists[11], that "*[...] People here don't give a fuck, unless you* [as a gay man] *don't go and present your boyfriend to them, otherwise people don't have problems with this*". The activist emphasised a crucial point: "*I get mad with all this [...] because our language is also neither gendered: when they start to use language to make gender specific, we are going down a very slippery slope. Because in no context I will think that this word will be used [...]*"[12]. Indeed, Swahili possesses a distinctive feature in its lack of grammatical gender categories, allowing speakers the flexibility to refrain from aligning or non-aligning with gender binaries through their language use.[13]

However, a pertinent question arises: how can self-identified gay men express their identities positively using Swahili terminology? This highlights concerns about the complexities and limitations of language when it comes to accurately expressing diverse gender identities, and emphasizes the potential influence of terminology that avoids negative connotations for those who identify as gay men. This sets the stage for the following section, which will delve into how men who self-identify as gay in Dar es Salaam define themselves.

Self-identification of gay men in Swahili

The analysis of the word *dondoandume* itself, as well as what activists thought of it, led me to explore and critically analyse the role of language in the expression and recognition of identities, particularly in the Swahili context.

The initial query posed to the activists participating in the interviews was: "How do you identify yourself?" The responses (n=18) are illustrated in the pie chart in Figure 2.

implication becomes more pronounced in a nation where same-sex marriages are expressly prohibited by law, as outlined in the Tanzanian Penal Code's articles 138A, 154, 155, 157, and 176.
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tanzania_2005.pdf?lang=en
https://www.parliament.go.tz/polis/uploads/bills/acts/1662102362-CHAPTER%2016-THE%20PENAL%20CODE.pdf

[11] All quotes in this paper are in English unless otherwise indicated. Additionally, activists have been anonymized to mitigate potential risks, prioritizing their privacy and confidentiality. Therefore, quotes will be referenced with only the first letter of each activist's name.

[12] C., interview on October 31st, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.

[13] On discussions of gender in Swahili, see Atanga & al. (2013) and Beck (2003).

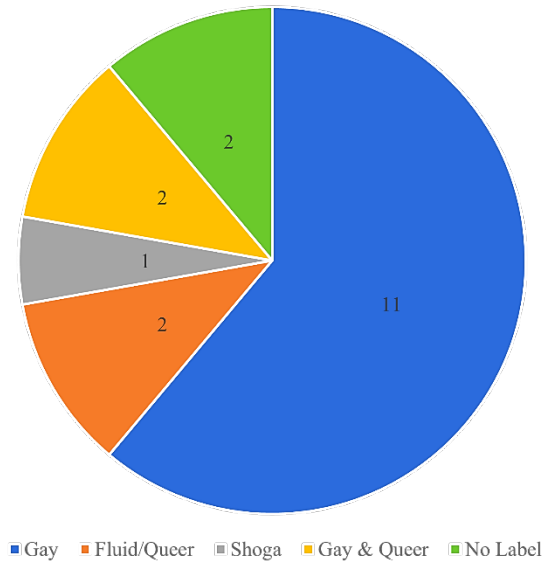

Figure 2: *How activists identified themselves*

The chart indicates that the majority of activists identify themselves using labels from English terminology rather than relying on Swahili vocabulary. This preference emerges from the belief expressed by one activist that "*People will not understand it if you use some Swahili words, so English is better.*"[14] This underscores the perception held by many self-identified gay men that Swahili is not fully receptive to discussions on this topic. Furthermore, another activist emphasized that "*most people consider Swahili as a conservative language because it lacks words for sexual concepts, and thus it is necessary to use English.*"[15] For instance, certain terms (e.g. sex toys, dildo, down low man, fetish, and kinky, among others) do not occur in a Swahili translation in my interviews with activists, except through periphrasis and euphemisms. One activist asserted that "[...] *a lot of words in Swahili tend to come out like slangs and taboos; that's why a lot of people don't like to use them.*"[16] This indicates that societal discourse employs a semantic manipulation strategy, leveraging taboos surrounding sexuality to alter the meaning of words and imbue them with negative connotations, rendering them offensive to those affected. Consequently, this dynamic contributes to the formation and perpetuation of a culture characterised by negative stereotypes, prejudice and widespread homophobia.

Regarding the pie chart (Figure 2), it is noteworthy that only two activists explicitly employ the umbrella term "queer". One activist clarified his choice, stating, "*I am still questioning, I don't recognize myself in any of the LGBTQ+ part of the community… I am still processing in knowing myself more,*"[17] expressing a situation of self-discovery of his sexual orientation and openness towards whoever he may face. Conversely, two others prefer not to use any imposed label, and one of them explains: "[...] *for me, I don't resonate with that approach, so I will say that sexually I am attracted from so much, I don't know if I am gay, bisexual or... I don't know. I can't put it in words, maybe gay more, but in general, I identify as free spirit, as I am attracted*

[14] T., interview on October 26th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.
[15] J., interview on October 29th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.
[16] K., interview on October 12th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.
[17] M., interview on October 18th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.

by anything attracts me."[18] Emphasizing the idea that identity and sexual orientation transcend rigid labelling highlights the necessity of recognizing the fluidity and complexity inherent in personal identity. The notion that "not finding the words" is not merely metaphorical, but reflects a profound search for words that embody identity rather than simply represent it. This conceptual approach underscores the importance of language as a living entity, capable of evolving and expanding to encompass the diverse and nuanced experiences of individuals beyond conventional categorizations.

Lastly, only one activist employs the Swahili term *shoga*, saying: "*I don't know how to identify myself because I feel like I'm in a transition to bisexual to gay, that's the phase I am. But maybe shoga,*"[19] not being entirely sure if this label fits him well, just as he does not feel confident with any other commonly used term.

Some of these most frequent labels to (self)identify as a gay man encountered during fieldwork will be explained below, in *Table 1*, compared to the definitions given by the online Swahili Gay Dictionary from Moscas de Colores' project;[20] Reuster-Jahn & Kießling (2006); Kinyua (2017); Ohly (1987); and the first Swahili dictionary by Ludwig Krapf (1882). The table enables an in-depth historical comprehension of each term and allows an analysis of the semantic changes of certain words as well as their disappearance and reappearance over time. These observations are made possible through the utilization of dictionaries and collections from various years, encompassing different historical periods.

	Personal Fieldwork 2022	**Swahili Gay Dictionary Online**	**Kinyua 2017**	**Reuster-Jahn & Kießling 2006**	**Ohly 1987**	**Krapf 1882**
(M)SHOGA	Used with the general meaning of 'gay', regarded as the politest word to identify as gay man, but also used with the connotation of feminine boy, given the more common use of the word itself and pertaining to friendship between two women (close to	*Shoga* is an expression used to name the homosexual or effeminate men who is the sexual partner of the *basha*. It is a term related to the feminine, since it is also used to indicate the best qualities of a woman and also to name the best friend	Word formation process: borrowing. A swahili term for gay. [...] *Shoga* is a word that has been subjected in conversation and has been used to bash queer people especially in the coastal region for many years.	The term is not included in the LyM dictionary, as it is part of the Standard Swahili lexicon (i.e. included in official dictionaries, such as published by TUKI) and has not undergone semantic change in LyM (pers. comm. Uta Reuster-Jahn,	/	A friend, used by women in speaking or to one another in Zanzibar. In Lamu *shoga* means a catamite.

[18] K., interview on November 17th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.
[19] G., interview on October 15th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.
[20] https://www.moscasdecolores.com/en/gay-dictionary/swahili/

	the English word 'sister-hood'). Given the latter connotation, it is very often heard as an offense, but it is also often used by gay men to call each other, and in that case, it is not seen as such. In addition, the same word is used to refer to the person penetrated during sexual intercourse, in English referred to as 'bottom'.	of a woman. Variation: *Mashoga*.		28.07.2024). The authors use it when explaining the meaning of LyM terms that lead back to the definition of gay (see *mshumaa*, *mtoto wa watu*, *shost/shosti, chakula, choko, kaka poa* and *msenge*).		
MSENGE	For some, it has a generic meaning of 'gay'; for others it means "practicing same-sex"; for others it is considered "heavy Swahili" due to its entirely negative connotations related to the person being penetrated during sexual intercourse or even "someone who likes to be sexually submissive". As an insult, it is comparable to the English 'asshole'.	*Msenge* is an insult that seems to be quite common in the area of Tanzania, and it is the equivalent of the classic "sissy." It is found in the middle of the last century written as '*senge*', referring to the single man as its first meaning, but also to the bottom and feminine homosexual, the one who is sodomized, and to queens. It is also associated with transsexuality and transgender identity, and	Word formation process: borrowed. Gay man. [...] An abusive term reffering to a gay person.	*Msenge*: n1/2 *shoga, mwanamume ambaye anafanya mapenzi na wanaume wenzake.* Homosexual man (who receives penetration).Attested in older Swahili slang as **senge*: "(1) lazy fellow; (2) nancy, queen, somebody sodomised".	The form '*senge*' is present introduced as "hom", that is "homosexual term": 2) *nancy, queen; sodomised.* [21]	*Msenge*: (pl. wa-), a liar? (Erch.); cfr. *kusengénia*. (: "to calumniate or backbite anybody in his absence").

[21] Interestingly also the form '*msonge*' is present: (1) girl; woman (2) sweetheart (3) lady. By presenting this variation, the author aims to capture the full range of expressions that share closely related meanings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the lexical field.

		we have even seen it translated as "whore".				
(M)CHOKO	It is described as one of the most derogative terms to describe gay men, like the English word 'faggot'. According to one of the activist, in slang it have also the meaning of 'underwear', specifically 'the speedos' (Standard Swahili: *chupi*).	[...] It is used to refer to bottom homosexual men. The origin of the term and its relationship with homosexuality seems confusing and various possibilities are pointed out. Some derive it, without further ado, from the French word "chocolat", perhaps because of the youthfulness of the so-called and the colour of their skin. Others point to the Swahili word *choco*, which means oven. Its sexual connotation would derive from the form of such ovens, similar to that of the butt.	/	*Choko* is included in a list of terms in the semantic field of homosexual men, "especially those who receive penetration" (2006: 23). Also, "Whether choko is derived from 'chocolate' was not confirmed by our informants" (ibid.). In the Dictionary (p. 107): n5/6 homosexual man; Metaphoric extension of Standard Swahili **choko 'oven'*? Or terminal clipping of LyM **choko-laa*?	/	/
MCHICHA	In Standard Swahili is "*spinach like plant*" while for some activists, it is used to refer to "someone that is not strong".	/	/ [22]	/	Bribe.	/
MCHELE	It is also 'rice'. […] "especially in these coastal places" and it connected with gay men maybe	/	/	/	Lax teacher.	The form *mchelle* is present: cleaned grain, especially rice.

[22] The form *chichi* is present as a Sheng variation with the meaning of "a gay person". The author explains also its word formation process as coinage.

	"because they [people] take rice as something weak".					
BWABWA	It is used as a generic term for 'gay'.	The expression Bwabwa is a euphemistic derivation [morphologically, it is an augmentative] of the word *ubwabwa*, that translates into "undercooked rice" [error: it is overcooked rice]. It is used against bottom homosexual men. As in many other places in the world, the idea of a homosexual man (especially if he is bottom) as a "half-made" man or a half-man (the other half is a woman), usually has an equivalent in local slang.	/	*Bwabwa*: n5/6 msenge, homosexual man. Euphemistic extension [morphologically it is an augmentative] of Standard Swahili **ubwabwa* 'soft cooked rice'.	The following form is present: *Ubwabwa*: (1) rice [soggy rice for children], (2) *ubwabwa wa kupinda* rice.[23]	/

Table 1 *Etymology of the words used by activists to identify a gay man.*

Classifying the degree of politeness of the examined terms proves challenging, given that a significant majority of them carry negative connotations. Furthermore, the use of these terms has the potential to adversely impact the conversational tone and influence perceptions of the speaker, as observed in the discussion of (M)Shoga and detailed in the section dedicated to my field research ("Personal Fieldwork 2022"). The contextual variability in the use of these terms, as evidenced by the relationship between speakers and the situatedness, further complicates any attempts at straightforward classification. For instance, when employed among gay friends, these terms may lack negative connotations, but when uttered by strangers in public spaces,

[23] Also, the form *Bwawa* is present with the meaning of "whore". By presenting this variation, the author aims to capture the full range of expressions that share closely related meanings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the lexical field.

they can assume a discriminatory character[24]. This underscores the critical importance of understanding how context shapes both the usage and interpretation of words. As one of the activists stated, "[...] *shoga means also friendship between females so it's a bit more polite compared to msenge, bwabwa, choko, mchicha* [...]"[25] and this is why it is much more frequently used to refer to gay men. Another activist regretted not being able to use his mother tongue as means of self-identification, saying, "*It could be hard to change the meaning of a word, its function,"* but suggesting that *"there might be more celebration to gay people in Tanzania if the word 'shoga'*," as well as the other terms mentioned, "*will have a different light. But for now, all of them have a very bad connotation.*"[26]

Desire in words: insights into Swahili (homo)sexuality

In addition to the self-identification terminology analysed above, the fieldwork data add to existing Swahili resources concerning homoerotic desire, both in romantic and sexual contexts. It complements the established lexical collections by Reuster-Jahn & Kießling (2006), Kinyua (2017), and the Moscas de Colores' online dictionary project. The gathered items form a comprehensive repository, capturing the richness and diversity of the language used to describe male homosexual intercourse.[27] By including nouns, adjectives, verbs, periphrases, and everyday expressions, this research contributes to a thorough understanding of the semantic landscape surrounding male (homo)sexuality in Swahili discourse.

The following analysis will focus on selected items of linguistic significance, examining their semantic structure and practical usage within the urban context of Dar es Salaam. To conduct this diachronic analysis, each chosen item will be juxtaposed with entries in the TUKI (*Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili*, engl. Swahili Research Institute) online dictionary, as well as with the dictionaries compiled by Krapf (1882) and Ohly (1987). The choice to utilise these three dictionaries was made to represent three different epochs: Krapf (1882) represents the first Swahili language dictionary from the pre-colonial era, during the early European missions in Africa; Ohly (1987) represents the first dictionary concerning Swahili slang, written during the post-colonial period; and finally, the use of TUKI (2001) as a digital tool of the 21st century, serving as one of the earliest online Standard Swahili language dictionaries.

Additionally, the analysis aims to shed light on the contemporary usage of these terms in the daily life of the city, utilizing the meanings attributed to each word by activists encountered during my personal fieldwork. The absence of a given word in one or all three of these referenced dictionaries implies its exclusion from their respective collections. Before delving deeper

[24] This recalls the reclaiming of the N-word among black people (among the hundreds of examples on this, see Kennedy 1999; Rahman 2012; Demby 2023 available online: https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/09/06/219737467/who-can-use-the-n-word-thats-the-wrong-question)

[25] T., interview on October 15th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.

[26] K., interview on November 17th, 2022, in Dar es Salaam.

[27] In this case, I chose to use the term "intercourse" as it encompasses both the sexual context and the broader meaning of social interaction (see Collins, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/it/dizionario/inglese/intercourse).

into the analysis, it is crucial to emphasize that certain terms mentioned in the following discussion (such as the terminology associated with sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV/AIDS) are not exclusive to gay men. However, in this context, they were specifically highlighted and analysed due to their significance, as requested by the activists.

In interviews, the verbs most commonly used to indicate "to have sex" or "to fuck" are *kufira* and *kutia*. The basic form of these verbs denotes the penetration (by the top), while their passive forms, *kufirwa* and *kutiwa* denote the act of being penetrated (of the bottom). *Kufirana*, with a reciprocal extension, means "to have (anal) sex with each other". Both TUKI and Krapf list *kufirana* as sodomize, and the latter also includes the meaning of adultery or pederasty.

The second verb, *kutia*, generally means "to put into". Krapf and the TUKI dictionary note that it can mean "to cause to one, to bring upon one, to make to go into" or "bring about, cause". Ohly (1987) includes the composition "-*tia mande*" meaning "sleep with a woman", where the noun *mande* appears under the item *umande* in TUKI as "dew" (probably a metaphor for sperm), where, talking about the concept of freshness, is similar to Krapf's "morning or land-wind, breeze from the land". Activists use *kutia* to mean "to have sex, to fuck", literally translated as "put something (the penis) into". Ohly's use of "woman" suggests that "to put into" in a sexual context often refers specifically to heterosexual activity.

Words referring to food often are used metonymically with sexual meanings, as Reuster-Jahn & Kießling have observed with regard to LyM (2006: 23, 27). For instance, *msupu*, commonly translated as "soup", has been adapted by certain activists and in everyday slang (though not confirmed by dictionaries) to mean "fuckable person". This metaphor could evoke the image of an object immersed in liquid, reminiscent of sexual action. Similarly, *candy*, a loanword from English, retains its form but takes on a new meaning. Activists frequently use it to describe someone attractive and seductive, emphasizing sweetness and desirability. *Chapati*, a traditional Swahili dish of Indian origin, has also sexual connotations. Ohly (1987) translates it as "making himself pleasant", while an interviewed activist uses it to describe a sexually versatile man—one who can take both the roles of penetrating and penetrated during intercourse. This reference aligns with how chapati is cooked: turned over to cook on both sides.

Other words to describe an attractive young gay man often refer to characters or people outside the gay context. Activists and people around the city frequently use terms like *serengeti boy* and *kibenten*. The former, refers to the Serengeti region and the "Serengeti Youth Football Club", known for its handsome young men. According to Ohly's slang dictionary, *serengeti* can also mean a "girl's school" (Ohly 1987: 72). The latter, *kibenten*, is derived from the children's cartoon Ben-10, introduced into gay slang without an apparent cognitive motivation.

There are two intriguing figures worth noting in this context: *shangazi* and *mdangaji*. *Shangazi* was casually mentioned during conversations among activists, describing "someone who teaches you how to be bottom". Interestingly, it shares its roots with the Swahili term for "paternal aunt", signifying an older figure with life experience. In the fieldwork context,

shangazi advises on sexual matters, while standard Swahili define it as a mentor in everyday life. In Ohly's dictionary, the same word has the meaning of "woman, girl", and thus associated with the meaning given by the activists by referring to the person penetrated in sexual intercourse, believed to be the most feminine in the sexual relationship.

On the other hand, *mdangaji* refers to a person who engages in transactional sex, also known as "gay-for-pay" among activists. This term is not documented in the dictionaries analysed, but it is mentioned in Reuster-Jahn's article on catcalling in Tanzania (2023), where it is described as a "woman who has sexual relations with men in order to get money out of them". It can be inferred that this word is not inherently gender-specific, but it certainly denotes the counterpart who is penetrated during sexual intercourse. From this term, another word emerges that has been frequently referenced during the interviews with activists, namely *danga.* This word, according to activists, means "daddy, sugar daddy", referring to a person who is older and has financial means. In TUKI, it means "[...] (1) scoop up/out a small quantity (2) look for sth scarce". Probably we could say that "scoop up/out" could be interpreted as "pulling out the money". So, the *mdangaji* is just that person who is looking for a *danga* who can pay him and give him gifts.

If we look at the terminology used for the word condom, we observe terms that go beyond the widespread *kondomu*: in fact, activists very often use *soksi, mpira* and *raba.*

Soksi is clearly an English loan from "socks", only reported by the online dictionary TUKI, and it can be directly related to something that covers and protects a part of the body.

Mpira, in standard Swahili has the meaning of "(1) rubber tree (2) rubber (3) ball (4) football", as reported by TUKI, thus referring to the material condoms are made of. In contrast, in Ohly, the same word appears with the meaning of "(1) Vagina (2) motor-car (3) police-car (4) belly of a pregnant woman", clearly indicating a variety of meanings, including those related to heterosexual intercourse. In Krapf there is a detailed description of how a soccer ball was made, referring to the liquid coming out from the rubber tree (*mtoria*). It is probable that there is a correlation with the material used, as evidenced by the reappearance of rubber in both TUKI and Krapf dictionaries.

Raba, borrowing from English "rubber": TUKI translates this term as "(1) training shoes, sports shoes, sneakers, plimsolls (2) rubber, raser"[28], finding reference with *soksi* where both terms refer to something the penis is put in, like a foot in a sock or in a shoe. In Ohly, we can see how the same term has the meanings of "(1) hanging breast (2) ugly girl", remaining, as with *mpira* in the same dictionary, on a purely feminine meaning and which in this case would not seem to have connection with condom. This term is not found in Krapf.

Connecting to the condom, a brief remark should be given to the word *nyoka*: in the slang used by activists, it means "penis", while in TUKI and in everyday usage it means "(1) snake

[28] Misspelling, where probably the correct word is 'eraser'.

(2) worm". In Ohly, the information reported by activists is confirmed: "Big penis, sodomite, and active homo" referring to both the sex organ itself and the active person during same-sex intercourse (where the term "homo" is an abbreviation of "homosexual", also specified by the presence of the word "sodomite" preceding it). The snake figure was also present in the meaning given by Krapf for the homographic noun *fira*, giving a negative view as it is poisonous. Once again, under the entry for *nioka* in the same entry, we can read: "*a serpent, snake in general. The natives believe that as the serpent which has bitten a person moves on, so the poison penetrates likewise [...]*" (Krapf 1882: 282). In both TUKI and Krapf, the serpent motif evokes sexual imagery associated with the penis, particularly in Krapf's case where it denotes a venomous snake—an image that blends desire with danger.

Finally, one last observation must be made regarding the terminology used for people with STIs. In this case, we see how activists propose different forms: *ana umeme* and *magonjwa ya zinaa* (or also *maradhi ya zinaa*). Regarding *ana umeme*, in a literal translation it would be "he/she has electricity". This interpretation is supported by the online TUKI, where *umeme* is defined as "(1) lightning (2) electricity". Additionally, Ohly interprets it as "(1) strong terms, sharp tongue", while Krapf refers to it as "lightning, flash of lightning". This dual interpretation presents a contrast: while *umeme* evokes the imagery of light, which can be positive, it also connotes electricity, symbolizing negative energy akin to an electric shock. This electric shock, is, then, a negative energy that enters the body of the person who takes it, similar to the idea of a sharp tongue and a rot-gut, all of these probably related to the physical pain that having STIs would bring.[29]

Regarding the second form, *magonjwa/maradhi ya zinaa*, literally translated it means "the disease of adultery", as TUKI also translates *zinaa* (from the verb *kuzini*) as "adultery, fornication". The term appears in Krapf's dictionary under the entry for *sinaa*, where we can read: "*kissu kina sinaa makali*" (where, according to the same dictionary, *kissu* means "knife" and *makali* refers to "the sharpness of the knife", therefore the translation could be "the knife has a sharp edge"). The word *uzini*, as noted by activists, carries connotations suggested by TUKI of libertinism, immorality, and obscenity. Interestingly, among gay young men in Dar es Salaam, the same term is used to denote "random sex", indicating sexual encounters devoid of emotional and romantic connection, often with complete strangers. According to these translations, we can observe that, on one hand, STIs become conditions due to fornication, adultery, as well as random sex, and on the other hand, these can also be painful like the sharp edge of a knife.

[29] It seems that the term *ana umeme* has changed its meaning in the last 20 years, as Reuster-Jahn and Kießling found that it was initially only used in connection with AIDS (2006: 188-189).

Conclusion

My study aimed to address how language reflects and influences non-heteronormative sexual identities in the Tanzanian complex and often hostile environment. Based on the analysis of the Swahili lexicon used by self-identified gay men, it portrays the liguistic dynamics within Dar es Salaam's gay urban community.

The creation and adoption of terms like *dondoandume, shoga*, and other terms analysed in *Table 1*, highlight linguistic creativity but also social and cultural tensions. These terms not only signify sexual orientations but also carry historical and contemporary nuances that reflect prevailing social norms and community perceptions. For instance, borrowing terms like *candy* and *chapati* from other languages and cultures to describe attractiveness and sexual versatility, respectively, illustrates a linguistic adaptation to modern urban reality.

This study also underscores the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in using Swahili to express their identities. The prevalent use of English terminology for self-identification among interviewed activists suggests that Swahili is perceived as less accepted for open discourse on this topic. This raises questions about the need to research deeply into a vocabulary that positively reflects and celebrates sexual diversity, while at the same time reclaiming the negative and stereotypical connotations currently associated with many terms in use.

In this context, the urban milieu where young people experience their identity and sexuality, serves as a dynamic catalyst that not only shapes the language but also captures the essence of a community navigating societal attitudes. The linguistic identity forged within this urban context attests to the community's ability to adapt and assert itself within a complex sociocultural landscape. This adaptation is evident in how terms evolve and are utilized to negotiate visibility and acceptance within broader society, reflecting both resilience and ongoing challenges.

Furthermore, this study underscores the broader significance of Lavender Linguistics within Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the need for continued exploration and understanding of how language evolves to encompass and empower LGBTQIA+ identities. Looking ahead, longitudinal studies could further elucidate the trajectory of the vocabulary used by this community in Swahili and its impact on societal attitudes, paving the way for more inclusive linguistic landscapes.

Future research could explore regional and demographic variations in Swahili linguistic usage within Tanzania to better understand how LGBTQIA+ identities are negotiated through language in different contexts, considering both the online and offline community.

This study calls for ongoing research and advocacy to shed light on language as a tool of empowerment and affirmation for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, in multicultural environments like Dar es Salaam and, more broadly, in the Global South.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the people I met in Dar es Salaam who were an integral part of this study. Their valuable contributions, support, and participation were crucial to the success of the study. I am deeply grateful to everyone whom I encountered during my brief and intense stay, for their generosity and for the way in which they welcomed me with open hearts and minds, understanding, and care. I am truly honoured to have had the opportunity to meet and work with such an extraordinary group of people and will forever cherish the memories and lessons learned during my time in Dar es Salaam. Without all of you, this work would never have seen the light of day.

References

Atanga, Lilian L., Sibonile E. Ellece, Lia Litosseliti & Jane Sunderland. 2013. Gender and Language in Sub-Saharan Africa. A Valid Epistemology? *Gender and Language in Sub-Saharan Africa: Tradition, Struggle and Change*", ed. by Atanga, Ellece, Litosseliti & Sunderland. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins. pp.1-26.

Beck, Rose Marie. 2003. Swahili. Perceptions of Gender in Swahili Language and Society. *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*, Volume 3, ed. by Matthias Hellinger & Hadumod Bußmann 2003. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins. pp. 311-337.

Casteleyn, Liselot. 2019. Challenging Queer African Narratives. A Case Study of LGBTIQ Activism in Nairobi as Local Nuance to (Trans)National Queer Narratives." Master Thesis, Ghent University. https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/791/446/RUG01-002791446_2019_0001_AC.pdf. (Last access 28 February 2023)

Hayes, Joseph J. 1981. Gayspeak. *The Language and Sexuality Reader*, ed. by Deborah Cameron & Don Kulick. 2006. Routledge, pp. 68-77.

Kinyua, Gemma K. 2017. A Lexical-Semantic Analysis of the Language of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Communities in Nairobi City County, Kenya, Master Thesis, Kenyatta University. https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/server/api/core/bitstreams/116e7295-22c7-49c2-8375-1bb436febc9c/content (Last access 11 November 2024)

Kennedy, Randall. 1999. Who can say "Nigger"? … And Other Considerations. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 1,26: 86-96.

Kiessling, Roland & Maarten Mous. 2004. Urban Youth Languages in Africa. *Anthropological Linguistics* 46,3: 303-341.

Krapf, Ludwig. 1882. *A Dictionary of the Suahili Language*. London: Trübner.

Kulick, Don. 2000. Gay and Lesbian Language. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29: 243-285.

Leap, William L. 2015. Lavender Language. *The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality*, ed. by Patricia Whelehan & Anne Bolin. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 1301-1304.

Luyt, Kathryn. 2014. *Gay Language in Cape Town: A Study of Gayle - Attitudes, History and Usage*. Master Thesis, University of Cape Town.

Madan, Arthur C. 1903. *Swahili-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Moen, Kåre, Peter Aggleton. Melkizedeck T. Leshabari & Anne Lise Middelthon. 2014. Gays, Guys and Mchicha Mwiba: Same-Sex Relations and Subjectivities in Dar es Salaam. *Journal of Homosexuality* 61,4: 511-539.

Moscas de Colores. N.d. *Gay Dictionary*: *Swahili.* https://www.moscasdecolores.com/en/gay-dictionary/swahili/. (last access 31 January 2023)

Ohly, Rajmund. 1987. *Swahili-English Slang Pocket Dictionary*. Vienna: Afro-Pub.

Rahman, Jacquelyn. 2012. The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community. *Journal of English Linguistics* 40,2: 137-171.

Rechenbach, Charles W. 1967. *Swahili-English Dictionary*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press.

Reuster-Jahn, Uta & Roland Kießling 2006. Lugha ya Mitaani in Tanzania. The Poetics and Sociology of a Young Urban Style of Speaking. *Swahili Forum* 13 (special issue). pp. 1-196.

Reuster-Jahn, Uta & Roland Kießling. 2022. Tanzania. Lugha ya Mitaani. *Urban Contact Dialects and Language Change. Insights from the Global North and South*, ed. by Paul Kerswill & Heike Wiese. New York & London: Routledge. pp. 167-185.

Reuster-Jahn, Uta 2023. Lugha ya Mitaani, Gender Stereotypes and Sexism. 'Catcalling' as a Communicative Practice of Male Youths in Urban Public Spaces in Tanzania. *Gendered Dichotomies in African Youth Language Practices. Urban and Rural Spaces, Virtual and Real-Life Gendered Discourses*, ed. by Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju. pp. 129-159.

Richardson, Anderson D. 2016. Gay Men's Language in Italy: In-Group Perceptions and Attitudes. *Undergraduate Honors Theses.* William & Mary. Paper 987. https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/987 (last access 31 January 2023)

Rudwick, S. 2010. Gay and Zulu, We Speak isiNgqumo: Ethnolinguistic Identity Constructions. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 74: 112-134.

Ruiz, Paul. 2012. Urbanism and Gay Identity. *New Visions For Public Affairs* 4:1-15.

Straface, Vincenzo. 2023. Unajitambulisha vipi? Mimi ni gay: Fieldwork on Homoerotic Desire in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Unpublished Master Thesis, University of Naples "L'Orientale".

Shepherd, Gill. 1987. Rank, Gender, and Homosexuality: Mombasa as a Key to Understanding Sexual Options.", in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. by Pat Caplan. London & New York: Routledge. pp. 240-270.

TUKI 2001. Kamusi ya Kiswahili-Kiingereza/Swahili-English dictionary, Dar es Salaam: Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili, University of Dar es Salaam. Available online: https://swahili-dictionary.com/swahili-english.

Appendix: Questionnaire used during personal fieldwork [Scan]

1. Why don't we start with you telling me a bit about yourself?

Tuanze kunieleza kidogo kuhusu wewe mwenywe?

2. How old are you?

Una miaka mingapi?

3. Where were you born?

Ulizaliwa wapi?

4. Have you ever lived anywhere else?

Unawahi kuishi mahali pengine popote?

[If not:] How long have you lived in Dar? What brought you here?

Umeishi Dar kwa muda gani? Nini kilikuleta hapa?

5. How do you identify yourself? Shoga, Msenge…?

Unajitambulisha vipi?

6. Do you consider yourself out?

7. When did you realize you were gay?

Lini uligundua kuwa wewe ni gay/homosexual?

8. According to you, being gay is something African?

Kulingana na wewe, kuwa gay ni kitu cha Kiafrika?

9. Does having sex with men make you gay? Or there is a difference between being bottom or top in a sexual intercourse?

Kufanya mapenzi na wanaume kunakufanya uwe gay? Au kuna tofauti kati ya chini au juu katika kujamiiana?

10. Are here local terms more applicable for people who have same-sex practices in Dar?

Hapa maneno ya kienyeji yanatumika zaidi kwa watu wanaofanya mapenzi ya jinsia moja huko Dar?

11. What's it like being gay in Dar?
Hivi kuwa gay huko Dar?

12. Do you partecipate in any kind of social activities with other LGBTQ people?
Unashiriki katika aina yoyote ya shuguli za kijamii na watu wengine wa LGBTQ?

13. Have you experienced homophobia?
Umepata chuki ya ushoga?

14. Do you use dating app? If yes, how do you feel using it, is a safe place for you?
Unatumia dating apps? Kama ndiyo, unahisije kuitumia, ni mahali salama kwako?

15. Could you give some examples of the most common words or phrases used by gay men? Using Kiswahili sanifu or lugha ya mitaani.
Unaweza kutoa baadhi ya mifano ya maneno au misemo ya kawaida inayotumiwa na wanaume gay? Tumia Kiswahili sanifu au lugha ya mitaani.

16. I'll give you some words, try to translate it in Swahili:
Nitakupa maneno, jaribu kutafsiri kwa Kiswahili (sanifi na/au mitaani)

HIV/AIDS – TOP – THREESOME – RANDOM SEX
(TO BE) HORNY – (TO HAVE) SEX – BOTTOM – DICK
ERECTION/BONER – TO SUCK (BLOWJOB) – PERSON WITH AN STI – CONDOM
ASS – SLUT – BAREBACK – JERK OFF
TO EJACULATE (CUM) – SAFE SEX – VERSATILE – YOUNG/OLD GUY
///
HIV/AIDS – TOP – BALLS – JERK OFF
(TO BE) HORNY – BLOWJOB/ORAL SEX – BOTTOM – DICK
FUCKABLE (PERSONE) – ONLY FOR PAY – PERSON WITH AN STI – EFFEMINATE GUY
LUBRIFICANT – TO LICK/RIM – BAREBACK – CONDOM – DOWN LOW (men who identify as straight but who secretly have sex with men)
TO EJACULATE (CUM) – FETISH – SEX TOYS/DILDO – YOUNG/OLD GUY