



LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT

Ndendeule (Tanzania) – Language Snapshot

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ABSTRACT

Ndendeule is a Bantu language spoken in the Namtumbo District of southern Tanzania. It is closely related to Ngindo and Matengo of the Rufiji group of Eastern Bantu. The speakers of Ndendeule are primarily rural people who farm as their main occupation. They are bilingual in Swahili, using the latter in trade, education, worship, administration, and professional communication. Ndendeule is currently losing domains of use, increasingly confined to family interactions. Most speakers are literate in Swahili but do not write in Ndendeule. Speakers are ambivalent regarding the vitality of their language as they view Swahili as the language of education and opportunities. Fewer young people increasingly embrace it as their primary language of communication, even in the home setting. This snapshot surveys the few studies of Ndendeule and describes the author's current work writing a grammar and archiving language materials.

Keywords: Ndendeule; Bantu; Rufiji; language endangerment



Language Name: Ndendeule (also Ndendeuli, Kindendeule, Kindendeβuli)

Language Family: Bantu, Niger-Congo

ISO 639-3 Code: dne

Glottolog Code: nden1249

Number of Speakers: ~220,000

Location: Namtumbo District, Ruvuma Region, Tanzania

EGIDS Vitality Rating: 6b, threatened (though Ethnologue labels it 6a, vigorous)

1. OVERVIEW

Ndendeule (iso 639-3 code *dne*, Glottocode *nden1249*) is spoken in southern Tanzania in Namtumbo District, Ruvuma Region. Alternate names include Ndendeuli, Ndendewuli, Kindendeule, and Kindendeuli. The speakers call their language Kindendeβuli and are known as βandendeβuli (singular Nndendeβuli). The contemporary name of the language is said to be derived from *ndenda βuli?* ('What shall I do?'), a common expression of despair used by the people subjugated by the warring Nguni (also referred to as Ngoni) intruders from southern Africa at the beginning of the 19th century. These words to the newcomers sounded like *Ndendeuli* (Ebner 1987; Gallagher 1974). Other accounts describe it as an expression of defiance, "What can you do?" (Edwards 2003: 33). While some native speakers and scholars dispute this as the folk origin of the name, I know of no alternative account.

The *Language Atlas of Tanzania* estimates that Ndendeule has 140,000 speakers (Mradi wa Lugha za Tanzania 2009). According to the 2022 Census, the wards where Ndendeule is spoken have a population of 220,889 (The United Republic of Tanzania 2022). The language is spoken mainly in Namtumbo District, close to the Tanzania-Mozambique border in the administrative wards of Kitanda, Msindo, Luchili, Namabengo, Namtumbo, Luegu, Mgombasi, Rwinga, Mkongo, Mkongo Gulioni, Likuyuseka, Mputa, Hanga, Litola, Mchomoro, Limamu, and Ligera (**Figure 1**). Additionally, there are language speakers in Madaba District in Gumbiro, Mtyangimbole, Mkongotema, and Mahanje, with a population of 36,829. Granted that not all people in these wards speak Ndendeule, the present author estimates there are about 220,000 speakers.

No study of Ndendeule dialects has been undertaken; what is presented here is based on the judgments and impressions of the present author as a native speaker and linguist. Ndendeule can be broadly divided into two major area varieties. One is the northwest variety in Mahanje, Msindo, and Gumbiro (north of Songea). It is characterized by, among other things, a lack of distinction between /i/ and /ɪ/ and between /u/ and /ʊ/. Like the neighboring Ngoni language to the West, the vowel system of the northwestern dialect of Ndendeule contains five vowels /i, ɛ, a, ɔ, u/. Another feature is the existence of voiceless fricatives such as /s/. The other variety is spoken in the east and southeast of Namtumbo District in Namtumbo, Mchomolo, Mkongo, Luegu, and Mgombasi. Unlike the northwestern dialect, this variety does not have fricatives except for the glottal fricative /h/. This variety has a seven-vowel system /i, ɪ, ɛ, a, ɔ, ʊ, u/, which more closely reflects the Proto-Bantu vowel system (Meeussen 1967). The present study is based on the southern dialect spoken around Mkongo.

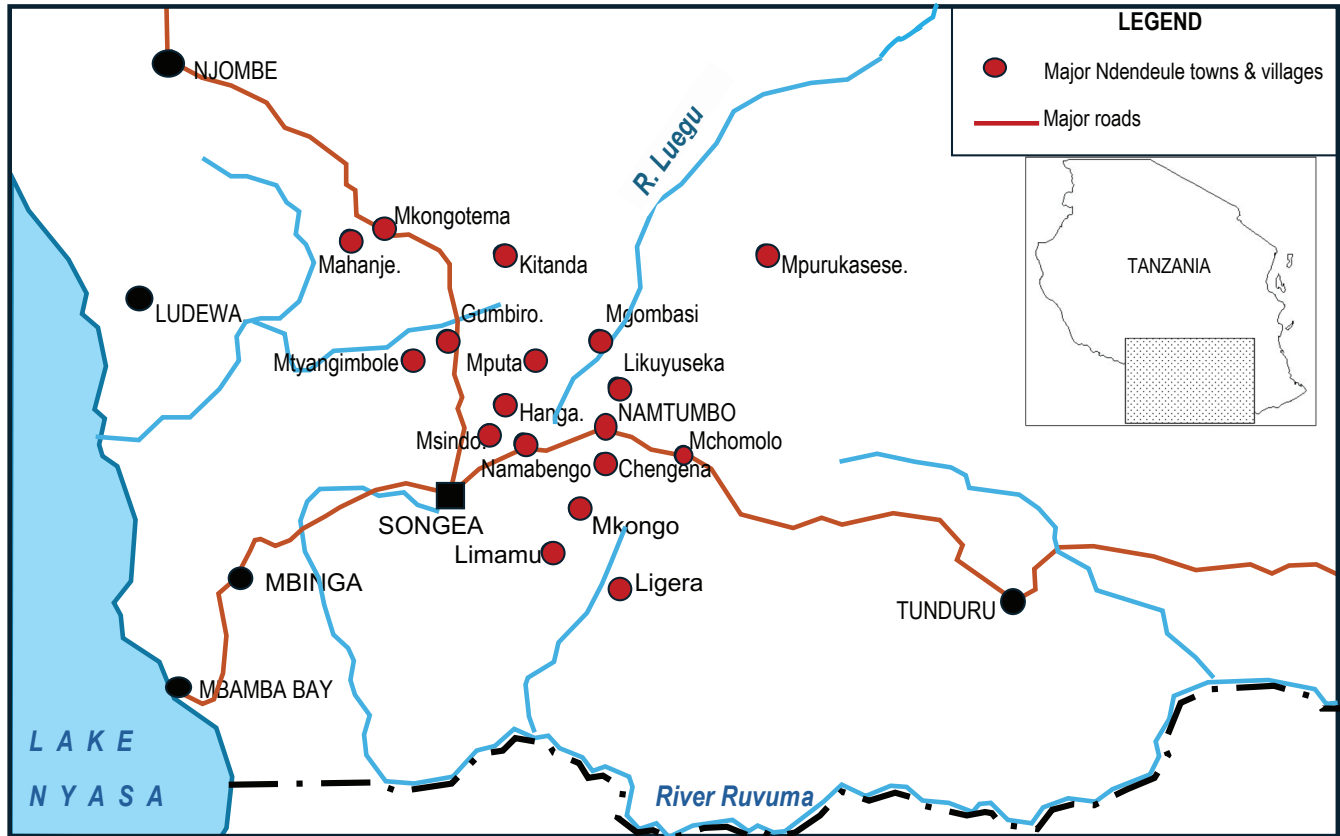


Figure 1: Major towns and villages where Ndendeule is spoken.

2. LINGUISTIC NEIGHBORHOOD

In Maho's (2003) update of Guthrie's (1967–71) classification of Bantu languages, Ndendeule is coded N101.¹ Recent studies classify Ndendeule with Ngindo, Ndengeleko, Rufiji, Matuumbi, Mbunga, Matengo, Mpoto, and Nindi (Ngonyani 1994; Nurse 1988; Nurse, Hinnebusch & Philipson 1993; Seligman 2014). Together they form the Rufiji languages, a branch of Rufiji-Ruvuma. Seligman (2014) identifies two branches of the Rufiji group: Mbunga and Inner Rufiji (**Figure 2**). Inner Rufiji is made up of three branches: (a) West Rufiji, (b) Central Rufiji, and (c) East Rufiji. Ndendeule belongs to Central Rufiji, with its closest relative being Ngindo (**Figure 3**). Oral traditions suggest that, prior to the coming of the Ngoni people from southern Africa at the beginning of the 19th century, there were no Ndendeule people. Instead, there was only Ngindo (Edwards 2003: 36). The Ngindo people who were incorporated into the Ngoni kingdom became known as Ndendeule, and their language was often mistakenly called Ngoni. Although this proposal about the internal branching of Rufiji differs slightly from Nurse (1988, 1999), the Ndendeule-Ngindo affinity is not in dispute.

¹ Guthrie divided the Bantu languages into zones, each assigned an upper-case letter for reference. Each zone consists of groups of languages, and each language is assigned a two-digit number. Maho (2003) updated the classification to include languages not listed in Guthrie's original classification. Thus, Ndendeule belongs to Zone N, Group 10, and is numbered 101. The last digit indicates that this language was not in Guthrie's original classification.

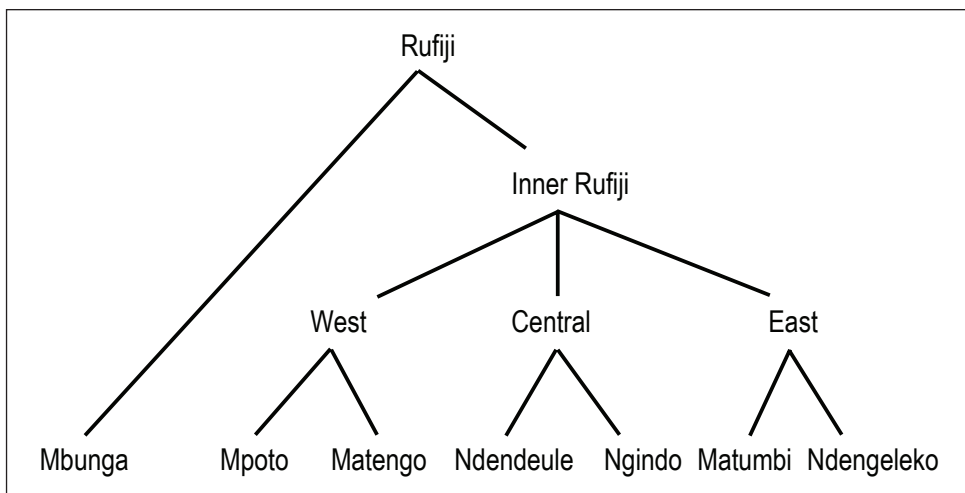


Figure 2: Rufiji languages (Seligman 2014).



Figure 3: Ndendeule and its neighbors.

3. VITALITY

Ndendeule is gradually losing its vitality and is being replaced in more and more domains of discourse. Speakers of Ndendeule also speak Swahili, which is the national language in Tanzania and a lingua franca throughout East Africa and parts of Central Africa. Swahili is the language of literacy in Tanzania.

Many Ndendeule speakers also learn the languages of their neighbors. For example, in the West, where contact with Ngoni is very close, many Ndendeule speakers are also fluent in Ngoni. In the East and South, contact with Yao has many Ndendeule speakers acquire Yao. Contact with Bena in the northwest has resulted in much multilingualism around Madaba. Generally, children today start learning Swahili before they begin school because it is the language of the marketplace, the stores, the mosque, and the church. Ndendeule remains the language of family and home interaction. Outside the home, speakers of Ndendeule use Swahili. It is very common for people to engage in casual conversation in Ndendeule and switch to Swahili once they change the field of discourse to subjects such as politics, religion, or education.

Ethnologue rates the status of Ndendeule as 6a, vigorous (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig 2024). This is the rating used for languages that are safe and used for face-to-face communication by all generations so that the situation is sustainable. However, from the present author's observations, younger people increasingly prefer Swahili in all domains. It is common to find children speaking to grandparents in Swahili rather than Ndendeule. This language shift process is now widely acknowledged for many languages in Tanzania (Batibo 1992; Legère 1992). Furthermore, like other languages in the country, Swahili has heavily influenced Ndendeule in a process called Swahilization (Yoneda 2010). So in my estimation, since it is losing users and domains of discourse, it would be more correct to rate Ndendeule as 6b, threatened.

4. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There have been a few studies on the Ndendeule society and language. Some anthropological studies have been carried out on the Ndendeule people, most notably by Gallagher (1973, 1974) and Gulliver (1971), who identify Ndendeule as a distinct ethnolinguistic community. The history of the people is presented in Ebner (1987), Edwards (2003), Gallagher (1974), and Seligman (2014). There is published work on Ndendeule vowel harmony (Ngonyani 2004; Nichols 2021), conditionals (Ngonyani 2017), negation (Bernander, Bloom Ström & Gibson 2022), applicatives (Ngonyani 1996a, 1998), and VP ellipsis (Ngonyani 1996b, 2000).

More comprehensive studies of the language are needed to fill in the gaps in the literature. For example, the tone system of the language remains to be described. Tense, aspect, and mood have yet to be discussed. Ndendeule's morphology is predominantly concatenative, but some morphology is non-concatenative. For example, the remote demonstrative *eni* is marked by circumfixation, as in (1a, b), and the marker of perfect aspect on verbs, *iCe*, overwrites the stem such that the stem-final consonant occupies the C position of the aspect marker, as in (2a, b). In the Bantu literature this phenomenon is commonly known as “imbrication”.

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|-----|----|--|----|--|
| (1) | a. | <i>βana βeniβa</i>
βa-ana β-eni-βa
2-child 2-REM-2
'those children' | b. | <i>kiliβa cenici</i>
ki-liβa ki-eni-ki
7-well 7-REM-7
'that well' |
| (2) | a. | <i>teleka ~ atelike</i>
'cook' ~ 'she/he cooked' | b. | <i>jaβula ~ ajaβwile</i>
'go' ~ 'she/he went' |

Like other Bantu languages, Ndendeule verbal derivation offers a rich area of investigation into morphosyntax. Apart from applicatives, the other types of derivation still need to be explored in their phonology, valency changes, productivity, and semantics. Descriptions of sentence structure that go beyond what is found in grammatical sketches are needed. Further study should also illuminate questions about language contact and affiliation. A preliminary examination of data from Mozambican Ngoni (Kröger 2017), along with data from Nindi collected by the present author, suggests that Nindi and Mozambican Ngoni might also belong to Central Rufiji alongside Ngindo and Ndendeule.

5. CURRENT RESEARCH

The author has a grammatical description of Ndendeule currently in preparation. The language has 18 consonants /p, t, c, k, β, l, j, ɣ, m, n, ŋ, ᵐb, ᵐd, ᵐj, ᵐg, w, h/ and 7 vowels /i, ɪ, ε, a, ɔ, u, u/. It has a predictable tone melody of Low-High-Low (LHL) with verbs showing L tones for prefixes, H for the stem, and L for the final syllable. The verb is highly agglutinative and can include prefixes such as subject marker, object marker, tense, aspect, negation, and subordinate marker. The suffixes include derivational, mood and aspect formatives. The derivations, commonly known as verb extensions, include applicative, causative, reciprocal, reversive, and stative. Like other Bantu languages, Ndendeule nouns are categorized into noun classes. There are 19 noun classes in the language characterized by the agreement they trigger on verbs, adjectives, possessive pronouns, demonstratives, connectives, numerals, and interrogative pronouns. Ndendeule is an SVO language.

Although the language is rated as vigorous, the diminishing transmission to younger speakers and absence of a written form suggests its vitality is waning. This is part of the motivation for the new project by the present author: a description of Ndendeule based on data from fieldwork and folktales collected from speakers of the language in Mkongo. The objective is to publish a comprehensive descriptive grammar with a wordlist and create a database consisting of a lexicon, sentences, and texts that will be accessible to all who are interested.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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