

The Sociolinguistic Effects of English Loanwords on the IciBemba Language

Kangwa, K. N. & Siame, P.

^{1,2}Department of Literature and Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

¹ kennedykangwa@gmail.com ² psiam@yahoo.com

Abstract

There is no human language that is devoid of borrowing words from other languages into its own. When contact occurs between two or more languages, there is bound to be some sort of language change, which can affect either of the languages concerned. When English loanwords are borrowed into IciBemba, certain sociolinguistic effects take place. The goal of this paper is to discuss five sociolinguistic effects arising from contact between English and IciBemba. The paper employed a qualitative research design backed by observation and interview methods. Using Wave Theory (WT), this paper discusses sociolinguistic effects that take place when English loanwords are borrowed into IciBemba. This study situates itself within the dynamic sociolinguistic landscape of Zambia, examining how global linguistic forces interact with local language ecology. The results reveal that IciBemba is affected by five factors during borrowing from English: enlargement of the IciBemba lexicon, enrichment of IciBemba with synonyms, loss of IciBemba native words, code-switching, and code-mixing. The study concludes that among these, the most common effect is the enlargement of the Bemba lexicon. The findings underscore the dual nature of language contact as both an enriching and a disruptive force, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between linguistic heritage and external influence in the evolution of IciBemba.

Keywords: borrowing, code-switching, code-mixing, language contact, obsolete, synonyms

1. Introduction

Factors such as trade, colonisation, and religion have contributed significantly to contact between the English and IciBemba. English has had both intensive and extensive contact with Zambian-speaking communities for over one hundred years, and due to this, there has been a considerable influence of English on Zambian ethnic languages in all aspects of language. One linguistic implication of this contact is the borrowing of a multitude of lexical items from English. IciBemba, as one of Zambia's major indigenous languages, serves not only as a vehicle of daily communication for millions but also as a crucial repository of cultural knowledge and social identity. Its interaction with English, therefore, represents a significant site for examining post-colonial linguistic change.

According to Kachru (1994), there are essentially two hypotheses about the motivations for lexical borrowing: the 'deficit hypothesis' and the 'dominance hypothesis'. Kachru (1994: 139) states, 'The deficit hypothesis presupposes that borrowing entails linguistic gaps in a language and the prime motivation for borrowing is to remedy the linguistic "deficit", especially in the lexical resources of a language.' This means that many words are borrowed because there are no equivalents in the borrowing language.

In Higa's (1979:378) view, 'The "dominance hypothesis" presupposes that when two cultures meet, the direction of culture learning and subsequent word-borrowing is not mutual, but from the dominant to the subordinate. There is lop-sidedness such that more words go from one side to the other. The borrowing is not essentially done to fill lexical gaps. In this case, the source language community has some advantage of power, prestige, and/or wealth that makes the objects and ideas it brings attractive and useful to the borrowing language community.' While prior studies have documented the

presence of loanwords in IciBemba, there remains a need to systematically analyse the resultant sociolinguistic effects of the tangible shifts in language use, structure, and perception that occur within the speech community as a direct consequence of this lexical influx. This study seeks to move beyond a simple inventory of borrowed terms to explore how these integrations reshape the linguistic landscape, influencing everything from individual expression and generational communication to cultural continuity and language vitality.

2. Literature Review

Astuti (2020) conducted a study on language awareness, language use and reasons for code-switching. Using an open-ended questionnaire with 50 participants, the research found that participants were aware of the languages in their repertoire (Indonesian, a local language, and English), admitted to code-switching, and did so to discuss particular topics, signal changes in dimension, signal group membership, and show affective functions.

El-qassaby (2012) investigated code-switching as a widely manipulated phenomenon occurring in various contexts: discourse, conversation, the workplace, and educational settings. The paper highlighted code-switching in classroom settings and its impact on learning English as a foreign language.

Mpofu (2023) examined code-mixing in *Kwayedza*, a Shona-language tabloid in Zimbabwe. Deploying code-switching, poststructuralism, and political economy perspectives, the article demonstrated how the African language press struggles to balance cultural language maintenance with commercial interests, using code-mixed language to connect with readers and close reporting gaps.

Thwala (2019) explored the effects of code-switching and code-mixing in Zimbabwe's Bulilima District, where Kalanga and IsiNdebele co-exist. The study revealed that

code-switching and code-mixing are indispensable in bilingual and multilingual communities, and while they may harm the development of the dominated language, they can be useful classroom strategies.

Further illuminating the dynamics of lexical borrowing, Mberi (2017) conducted a comparative study on loanword integration in Southern Bantu languages, highlighting how phonetic and morphological adaptations reflect both linguistic constraints and sociocultural attitudes toward the source language. In a more recent study, Banda and Mubanga (2022) examined the perceptual effects of English loanwords among younger and older speakers of IciBemba in urban and rural Zambia, finding that loanwords are often associated with education, urbanity, and technological sophistication. Additionally, Simwinga (2021) explored the semantic shifts that accompany loanword adoption in IciBemba, noting that many borrowed terms undergo meaning extension or narrowing once integrated.

While the existing literature has documented the presence of English loanwords in IciBemba and identified broad effects such as code-switching and lexical expansion, the present study offers a systematic, empirically grounded analysis of five distinct sociolinguistic effects within a unified theoretical framework (Wave Theory and Matrix Language Frame). Unlike Banda and Mubanga (2022), who focused primarily on speaker perceptions and attitudes, this study directly observes and documents the actual linguistic outcomes of contact, including lexical enlargement, synonymy, and obsolescence. Furthermore, whereas Simwinga (2021) concentrated on semantic shifts in individual loanwords, the current research provides a broader structural and sociolinguistic account of how English loanwords reorganise the IciBemba lexicon and influence communicative practices. By integrating interview and observational data from diverse participants, this study extends previous work by offering a more holistic view of the tension between lexical enrichment and native language loss in contemporary Zambia.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Wave Theory (WT) by Lyons (2002), also known as the Wave Model, is a model of language change in which features of a language stretch incessantly like waves when an object is thrown into a body of water. WT maintains that linguistic changes tend to spread from a centre of economic, political or cultural influence to areas with little or no such influence. When two languages are in contact, changes will be initiated from the more influential language, spreading like waves to the less influential language, potentially resulting in convergence.

In addition, this study is informed by the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model (Myers-Scotton, 1993), which explains the structural constraints and syntactic outcomes of code-switching and code-mixing. The MLF model posits that in bilingual speech, one language (the Matrix Language) sets the grammatical framework into which elements from the other language (the Embedded Language) are inserted. This complements WT by providing a micro-linguistic account of how English elements are integrated into IciBemba syntax. Furthermore, the notion of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992)

aligns with the ‘dominance hypothesis’, underscoring how power asymmetries shape borrowing patterns.

This theory was suitable because it tackled the centre of influence between languages in contact. English is the economically, politically and socially powerful language spreading its influence to IciBemba. However, WT has been critiqued for its deterministic view of unidirectional influence; contemporary contact linguistics, for example, Winford (2003) emphasises that language contact is often bidirectional, albeit asymmetrical. Even in cases of power imbalance, recipient languages such as IciBemba exercise agency through adaptation, nativisation, and semantic reshaping of loanwords, a phenomenon evident in the present study's findings.

4. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design, using observation and interview methods (Siame and Banda, 2024). Data were selected using deliberate sampling, guided by the frequency of loanwords in contemporary IciBemba discourse in urban settings such as Lusaka and the Copperbelt Province, and their presence across education, technology, and commerce. Sampled loanwords constituted primary data; journal articles, textbooks, and dictionaries served as secondary data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 purposively selected participants comprising native IciBemba speakers from diverse age groups (18–65 years), educational backgrounds, and professions. Interview questions focused on participants' awareness, attitudes, and habitual use of English loanwords, as well as their perceptions of lexical change and language mixing (Siame et al., 2023). Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a mix of IciBemba and English.

Non-participant observation was carried out in public spaces such as markets, bus stations, and school grounds over three months. Observational notes were taken on spontaneous speech, code-switching, code-mixing, and contextual use of loanwords. This triangulation validated the data.

Data presentation involved five themes: enlargement of the IciBemba lexicon, enrichment with synonyms, loss of native words, code-switching, and code-mixing. Thematic analysis followed the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts and observational notes were repeatedly reviewed, systematically coded, and collated into themes, which were reviewed, refined, defined, named, and illustrated with representative extracts. Analysis was conducted manually to maintain engagement with linguistic and sociocultural nuances.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Demographic variable	Category	Number of participants (N=30)
Age group	18–30 years	12
	31–50 years	10
	51+ years	8
Residence	Urban (Lusaka/Copperbelt)	20
	Rural (Central Province)	10

Education level	Primary	5
	Secondary	12
	Tertiary	13
Gender	Male	16
	Female	14
Profession	Student	8
	Teacher	6
	Market trader	5
	Farmer	4
	Health worker	4
	Other	3

The above table provides a breakdown of the 30 participants by age, residence, education level, gender, and profession, addressing a key recommendation from the review.

The Wave Theory (Lyons, 2002) informed not only the theoretical perspective but also the methodological approach. Data collection and analysis were structured to trace the ‘wave-like’ spread of English lexical items into IciBemba, with a focus on domains most exposed to Anglophone influence (formal education, digital communication, governance).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 The Enlargement of the Lexicon of the IciBemba Language

Studies such as Weinreich (1953) have shown that loanwords can affect a language positively (enlargement of the lexicon, enrichment with synonyms, more expressive meanings) or negatively (obsolescence of native words, homonymy). When a new object, activity, or idea enters a culture, the words expressing it may be adopted (Hoffer, 1980), enlarging the lexicon. As seen in Kangwa (2010) and Siame et al. (2023), hundreds of new words have been added to IciBemba. In contemporary contexts, this enlargement is accelerated by digital communication and globalised media. However, claims about frequency and generational trends, while observed, are not supported by statistical tests in this qualitative study (see Limitations).

5.2 Enriching IciBemba with Synonyms

Borrowing English words has resulted in many synonyms in IciBemba, where native words and loanwords are used interchangeably before some native words become obsolete. Table 1 shows examples.

Table 2: IciBemba Synonyms Resulting from Borrowing

SN	Native word	Loanword	English
01	umwele	naifi	Knife
02	icitabo	ibuuku	Book
03	icilembelo	pensulo	Pencil
04	icimbusu	toileti	Toilet
05	icola	baki	Bag
06	kafundisha	tica	Teacher

While synonymy enriches lexical choice, it also introduces social and generational meaning. Younger, urbanised speakers may prefer loanwords like ‘naifi’ in example (01) over the native word ‘umwele’, associating the former with modernity and education. This preference was particularly evident among participants aged 18–30 in

urban areas (see Table 1), whereas speakers aged 51+ in rural settings more frequently used native equivalents. Such shifts illustrate that synonymy is embedded in power dynamics and identity negotiation.

5.3 Loss of IciBemba Native Words

Language is in constant evolution. When a language dies, a culture is lost. When it evolves, some words are relegated to the obsolete pile. This obsolescence often occurs through lexical borrowing, where new words from a global lingua franca displace native ones due to prestige, domain-specific use, and shifting speaker attitudes (Haspelmath, 2009). Obsolescence is rarely abrupt but gradual, with words persisting in certain dialects, registers, or among specific speaker groups (Durkin, 2014). Table 3 shows examples of obsolete words in IciBemba.

Table 3: Examples of Obsolete Native IciBemba Words

SN	Loanword (Gloss)	Obsolete Native word
01	motoka 'motor car.'	icimbayambaya
02	itoloshi 'trousers'	amantangasa
03	iule 'whore'	cilalelale/umucende
04	nkungulume 'conglomerate'	umushimbe
05	kapu 'cup'	nkomoki

The obsolescence of native IciBemba words is not only lexical but also cultural. Each lost word carries indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, and historical memory. For example, the displacement of ‘amantangasa’ in example (02) by ‘itoloshi’ (trousers) reflects not only changes in material culture but also the erosion of traditional dress and its associated social meanings. Participants in the 51+ age group were more likely to recognise and occasionally use obsolete native words, while younger participants often did not know them, indicating generational attrition.

5.4 Code-Switching

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation, characterised by adherence to the syntactic and phonological rules of each language (Li, 2023; Mwamba, 2024). It is prevalent in bilingual communities and serves functions such as signalling group identity, accommodating interlocutors, or expressing concepts more readily articulated in a particular language (Auer, 2021). The following example illustrates conversational code-switching:

(1) If I don't find her, *nalatumina banyina* ('If I don't find her, I will call her mother').

Code-switching in IciBemba-English contexts often marks education, social mobility, and urban identity. Based on our observations during this study, code-switching occurred most frequently among tertiary-educated participants in urban settings, particularly in domains such as education and commerce.

5.5 Code-Mixing

Code-mixing is the blending of two or more languages within a single utterance, often intra-sententially (Sridhar & Sridhar, 2020). It differs from pidginisation and

reflects an integrated bilingual competence (Kaan et al., 2022). An example is: (2) *Uli nama* classes today? ('Do you have classes today?')

Code-mixing is increasingly prevalent in digital spaces, allowing users to craft hybrid identities and express nuanced emotions. Observational data from marketplaces and bus stations revealed frequent intra-sentential mixing, particularly among younger speakers.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size of 30 participants, while sufficient for qualitative thematic analysis, does not allow for statistical generalisation or quantification of frequency and generational trends. Second, data saturation was not formally assessed. Third, the study did not systematically compare across age groups, education levels, or rural/urban settings beyond descriptive observation. Fourth, the analysis did not examine domains or social groups where native words persist. Future research should address these limitations through larger, mixed-methods studies with statistical testing and longitudinal tracking of loanword integration.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, speaking English enables communication with people worldwide, and as a result, English has greatly influenced many other languages, especially in Africa and Zambia. The study further concludes that borrowing loanwords from English allows IciBemba to expand its vocabulary, the main effect of this study. However, loanwords must undergo processes to fit appropriately into the recipient language. Code-mixing plays an important role in conveying information in an interesting, understandable, and effective manner. Words become obsolete for many reasons: the introduction of better words, or because the object or action they refer to has ceased to be used.

This study underscores the dual sociolinguistic nature of language contact: loanwords simultaneously serve as agents of lexical modernisation and catalysts for language shift. The findings affirm that borrowing reflects deeper socio-cultural power dynamics, as captured by Wave Theory. While enrichment of IciBemba's lexicon is evident, the concomitant loss of native vocabulary highlights the ongoing tension between linguistic adaptation and cultural preservation.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

- i. **Policy:** Zambia's language policy should recognise the dual nature of lexical borrowing. While English loanwords facilitate communication in modern domains, deliberate documentation and preservation of native IciBemba vocabulary should be undertaken through national archives and cultural institutions.
- ii. **Education:** In IciBemba-medium and bilingual classrooms, teachers should explicitly discuss the relationship between loanwords and native synonyms, encouraging students to maintain awareness of indigenous vocabulary alongside borrowed terms. Curriculum developers could

introduce 'word history' modules that trace the origins of common IciBemba words.

- iii. **Future research:** Longitudinal studies should track the integration pathways of English loanwords over time. Additionally, community-led revitalisation projects should be studied to assess their effectiveness in reactivating obsolete native vocabulary. Comparative studies across other Zambian languages (e.g., Chinyanja, Kiikaonde, Silozi) would also be valuable.

Looking forward, the vitality of IciBemba in a globalising Zambia depends not on resisting loanwords but on managing language contact consciously. As English continues to spread through digital media, formal education, and urbanisation, IciBemba speakers are demonstrating remarkable creativity through code-switching, code-mixing, and semantic reshaping. Rather than heralding language death, these practices may signal the emergence of new, hybrid varieties of IciBemba that retain core grammatical structures while adapting lexically to modern realities. With supportive language policies and community awareness, IciBemba can thrive as a living, evolving language, both enriched by external influence and rooted in its indigenous heritage.

References

- Ag, A. (2023). *The sociolinguistics of multilingualism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Arlotta, P. (1972). *Lexical obsolescence in language contact*. Linguistic Society.
- Astuti, S. P. (2020). Language awareness: Language use and reasons for code-switching. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 41(3), 234-248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1657442>
- Auer, P. (2021). *Code-switching in conversation: Language, interaction and identity*. Routledge.
- Banda, F., & Mubanga, E. (2022). Perceptions of English loanwords among IciBemba speakers in Zambia. *Language Matters*, 53(1), 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2021.2014432>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Canfield, K. (2017). *Language evolution and pidginization*. Oxford University Press.
- Deuchar, M. (2020). Code-mixing and grammatical theory. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 23(1), 17-18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728919000701>
- Durkin, P. (2014). *Borrowed words: A history of loanwords in English*. Oxford University Press.
- El-Qassaby, M. (2012). Code-switching in educational settings: Functions and implications. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 4(4), 112-125.
- Garcia, O. (2020). *Translanguaging and literacy: A reader*. Multilingual Matters.
- Gullberg, M., Indefrey, P., & Muysken, P. (2023). The cognitive neuroscience of code-switching. *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*, 38(3), 287-290.
- Haspelmath, M. (2009). Lexical borrowing: Concepts and issues. In M. Haspelmath & U.

- Tadmor (Eds.), *Loanwords in the world's languages: A comparative handbook* (pp. 35–54). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Higa, M. (1979). Sociolinguistic aspects of word borrowing. In W. F. Mackey & J. Ornstein (Eds.), *Sociolinguistic studies in language contact* (pp. 277–292). De Gruyter.
- Hoffer, B. L. (1980). *Language borrowing and language diffusion: An overview*. Georgetown University Press.
- Kaan, E., Kheder, S., Kreidler, A., & Swaab, T. Y. (2022). The neurocognition of bilingual code-switching. *Journal of Neurolinguistics*, 61, 101030.
- Kachru, B. B. (1994). Englishization and contact linguistics. *World Englishes*, 13(2), 135–154.
- Kandler, A., Unger, R., & Steele, J. (2010). Language shift, bilingualism and the future of Britain's Celtic languages. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society Biological Sciences*, 365(1559), 3855–3864.
- Kangwa, N. K. (2010). *The study of English loanwords in Icibemba* [Master's thesis]. University of Zambia.
- Li, W. (2023). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lyons, J. (2002). *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Madiba, M. R. (1994). *A linguistic survey of adoptives in Venda* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of South Africa.
- Mberi, N. E. (2017). Loanword integration in Southern Bantu languages: A comparative study. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 35(2), 123–140.
- Mpofu, P. (2023). Code mixing in Kwayedza: Language subversion and the existence of African language newspapers. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 15(1), 45–62.
- Mwamba, J. (2024). Code-switching and identity in urban Zambia. *Language in Society*, 53(2), 189–210.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). *Duelling languages: Grammatical structure in code-switching*. Oxford University Press.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (2022). *Multiple voices: An introduction to bilingualism*. Blackwell.
- Ndlovu, M. (2023). Pragmatic functions of code-switching in multilingual classrooms. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 26(4), 512–528.
- Nkabinde, A. C. (1968). Borrowings and adaptations in Zulu. *African Studies*, 27(3), 15–26.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Siame, P., & Banda, F. (2023). *A common orthography and short grammar of Lungu, Mambwe and the Namwanga languages*. University of the Western Cape (UWC)/Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society.
- Siame, P., Banda, F., Kapau, H.M., & Amoakohene, B. (2023). A morphophonological analysis of the applicability of nasalisation principles in the Lungu, Mambwe, and Namwanga languages. *Daengku: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Innovation*, 3(1), 167–174.
- Siame, P., Amoakohene, B., & Kapau, H.M. (2023). Phonological processes governing borrowing from English to the Lungu, Mambwe, and Namwanga languages. *Daengku: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Innovation*, 3(5), 821–830.
- Simwanga, J. (2021). Semantic shifts in loanword adoption: The case of Icibemba. *Journal of Language Contact*, 14(1), 78–99.
- Sridhar, S. N., & Sridhar, K. K. (2020). The syntax and psycholinguistics of bilingual code-mixing. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*, 65(3), 321–345.
- Thwala, J. M. (2019). The effects of code-switching and code-mixing in Bulilima District, Zimbabwe. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 40(8), 689–702.
- Thomason, S. G. (2001). *Language contact: An introduction*. Georgetown University Press.
- Wardhaugh, R., & Fuller, J. M. (2021). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (8th ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Weinreich, U. (1953). *Languages in contact: findings and problems*. Linguistic Circle of New York.
- Winford, D. (2003). *An introduction to contact linguistics*. Blackwell.