



Beyond Fluency: Language Attitudes, Identity, and Preservation Intentions Among Young Diaspora Speakers of Usku, Papua

Azhari Azhari^{1*}, Ahmad Taufiq², Muhammad Zikrullah³

¹Department of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pannonia, Veszprém, Hungary; ²Department of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Languages, Arts, and Culture, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia; ³Department of English Education, College of Education, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, United States.

*Corresponding author: Azhari Azhari, Department of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pannonia, Veszprém, Hungary. Email: XGME86@student.uni-pannon.hu

Abstract

The rapid shift toward dominant lingua francas threatens Papua's extraordinary linguistic diversity, placing moribund isolates like Usku (Afra) at immediate risk of extinction. This study investigates the language attitudes, ideologies, and ethnic identity negotiations of the young Usku diaspora generation residing outside their ancestral territory in Keerom Regency, Papua. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from N=173 diaspora youth (100 males, 73 females) through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using JASP Statistics. The empirical results reveal a pronounced asymmetry between low self-reported Usku competence ($M=1.84$) and high cognitive ($M=4.21$) and affective ($M=3.89$) language attitudes. Crucially, structural language competence showed no statistically significant correlation with ethnic identity strength ($r=.12$, $p=.116$), demonstrating that youth decouple active fluency from ethnic self-identification. Inferential testing identified a significant gender difference in affective attachment, with young women exhibiting higher emotional attachment to the heritage language than men ($p=.006$). Multiple linear regression indicated that affective attitude is the strongest predictor of youth preservation intentions ($\beta=.40$, $p<.001$), outranking cognitive valuation and baseline fluency. These findings imply that classical models linking fluency loss directly to identity erosion must be re-evaluated in Papuan diaspora contexts. Furthermore, effective revitalization initiatives must move beyond traditional grammatical codification to prioritize emotionally engaging, youth-centered, and culturally immersive platforms.

Keywords: Usku Language, Language Shift, Language Attitude, Youth Identity, Papuan Language Isolate

Introduction

Language endangerment has emerged as one of the most pressing socio-cultural crises of the twenty-first century (Passmore et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2022; Awal, 2024). Current linguistic assessments estimate that over half of the world's approximately 7,000 spoken languages will become silent by the end of this century if current rates of language shift persist (Bromham et al., 2021; Kidd et al., 2022). This loss of linguistic diversity is particularly acute in Papua, a region recognized as the most linguistically diverse geographic area on Earth, harboring more than 800 distinct Papuan and Austronesian languages (Kik et al., 2021; Fraenkel et al., 2022). Within the western half of the island, encompassing the Indonesian provinces of Papua, indigenous languages face compounding pressures from rapid socio-economic modernization, urbanization,



administrative centralization, and the widespread adoption of regional and national lingua francas (M., Zaman et al., 2025). Among the diverse ethnolinguistic groups of eastern Papua, moribund language isolates represent the most fragile component of this linguistic ecosystem. Because language isolates possess no demonstrable genealogical relationship to any other known language family, their extinction represents an irreplaceable loss to human cognitive science, historical linguistics, and global cultural heritage (Skirg ard et al., 2023).

One such critically endangered language isolate is Usku, locally designated by its speech community as Afra (Hl et al., 2023). Spoken in the Senggi District of Keerom Regency, near the border between Indonesia and Papua Papua, Usku is currently maintained by a fragile speech community numbering approximately 100 individuals (Martono et al., 2021; De Vries, 2012). Geographically flanked by communities speaking languages from the Pauwasi and Border families, Usku has historically maintained a complex pattern of multilingualism. However, contemporary socio-political transformations in the Keerom borderlands have drastically altered the regional ecology of language use. The accelerated expansion of Papuan Malay as the dominant regional medium of daily commerce and inter-ethnic interaction, combined with the official hegemony of Standard Indonesian in formal education, government, and digital media, has severely constrained the functional domains of indigenous languages across the region (Katubi et al., 2026). Consequently, Usku has transitioned from a state of stable indigenous multilingualism to a condition of severe intergenerational disruption, placing it squarely within the moribund category on international endangerment scales (Forsyth, 2025; Bickford et al., 2014).

Sociolinguistic scholarship demonstrates that the structural decline of an endangered language rarely occurs in a socio-cultural vacuum (Low et al., 2022; Dai & Wang, 2026). Rather, language shift is mediated by language ideologies, defined as the cultural systems of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that speakers construct regarding the structure, value, and social utility of language forms (Rosillo-Rodes et al., 2023; Oral-Sariba , 2026). In situations of intense language contact involving minoritized indigenous populations and dominant national societies, language ideologies directly shape the subjective choices of individual speakers (Kroskrity, 2023; Sultana, 2021). When indigenous youth perceive their ancestral language as an impediment to socio-economic mobility, educational advancement, or modern social integration, they frequently adopt negative language attitudes. These attitudes manifest as linguistic stigma, leading to a deliberate reduction in productive language use and an intentional decision not to transmit the ancestral tongue to subsequent generations (Almalki et al., 2026; Chandras, 2023). Conversely, positive language ideologies grounded in ethnic pride, cultural continuity, and indigenous identity can serve as potent catalysts for grassroots language preservation and youth-led revitalization movements (Valdiviezo et al., 2025; Huang, 2022).

Recent research on language endangerment emphasizes that the young generation occupies the critical pivot in the trajectory of language vitality. As the primary demographic navigating the intersection between traditional community structures and modern state institutions, youth serve as the ultimate decision-makers regarding intergenerational transmission (Crosnoe, 2021; Cittadini & R, 2025). When younger cohorts abandon their heritage language in favor of a prestigious regional lingua franca, the path to language death becomes nearly irreversible. Therefore, understanding how indigenous youth evaluate, conceptualize, and emotionally position their ancestral language relative to competing state and regional languages is paramount for both theoretical sociolinguistics and practical language documentation.

Despite a growing body of scholarship documenting language endangerment across the Pacific, significant empirical and theoretical gaps persist regarding the sociolinguistic dynamics of moribund language isolates in eastern Indonesia. While structural and descriptive linguists have produced valuable sketches of Papuan grammar and phonology, the sociolinguistic dimensions of language shift among small-scale, non-Austronesian speech communities remain under-researched. Existing documentation efforts in Papua have predominantly focused on structural elicitation, grammatical codification, and lexical compilation. While these descriptive outputs are essential, they frequently overlook the socio-psychological and ideological mechanisms that drive language retreat at the community level.

The extant literature on Papuan sociolinguistics has tended to treat indigenous speech communities as homogenous entities, often relying on the reported behaviors of elder language

consultants while underrepresenting the distinct perspectives of adolescents and young adults. Studies in other indigenous contexts demonstrate that youth language practices often diverge radically from those of elder generations, characterized by complex patterns of receptive bilingualism, code-switching, and identity negotiation (Kroskrity, 2023; Dahmen, 2021; Huang, 2026). In the context of Usku (Afra), no empirical study has systematically investigated how contemporary youth perceive their ancestral tongue amidst the pervasive influence of Papuan Malay and Standard Indonesian. It remains unclear whether the observed decline in Usku usage among youth stems from overt linguistic stigma, structural language attrition, or a pragmatic realignment of language choice in response to shifting socio-economic domains.

A major theoretical tension persists in sociolinguistic literature regarding the relationship between ethnic identity and language vitality in highly endangered contexts. Classical models of language shift suggest that the loss of a heritage language correlates directly with the erosion of ethnic identity (Alyami, 2023; Eberhard, 2018). However, emerging research among indigenous youth in global contexts indicates that young people frequently disconnect linguistic fluency from ethnic self-identification, maintaining a robust sense of indigenous identity even after undergoing complete language shift (Werito, 2022; Chon, 2022). Whether young Usku people view the Afra language as an indispensable marker of their ethnic identity, or whether ethnic identity is being reconstructed through non-linguistic cultural markers and regional varieties of Malay, remains an open empirical question. Addressing this gap is critical for predicting the long-term viability of Usku and for designing sociolinguistically grounded intervention strategies.

To address these empirical and theoretical limitations, this study investigates the language ideologies, attitudes, and identity negotiations of the young generation within the Usku (Afra) speech community in Senggi District, Keerom Regency, Papua. Specifically, this research examines how young Usku individuals evaluate their ancestral language in comparison to Papuan Malay and Standard Indonesian across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Furthermore, it explores the social, economic, and institutional factors that cultivate language pride or foster language stigma among youth, while evaluating how linguistic competence intersects with their conceptualization of ethnic identity.

This investigation is guided by three specific research questions:

1. What are the prevailing language attitudes and ideologies held by the young generation of the Usku (Afra) community toward their ancestral language, Papuan Malay, and Standard Indonesian?
2. How do language attitudes and varying levels of linguistic competence in Usku influence the negotiation of ethnic identity among young Usku individuals?
3. What socio-cultural, economic, and educational factors drive the emergence of language pride versus language stigma among youth in the Senggi borderland area?

This study offers several significant contributions to sociolinguistics, language documentation, and language policy. Methodologically, by employing a mixed-methods sociolinguistic framework incorporating semi-structured qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and a structured domain-use survey, this research provides a nuanced, empirically grounded portrait of youth language ideologies in a critically endangered isolate. Theoretically, the study advances global debates on language endangerment by examining how language shift operates in small-scale Papuan societies where language isolates face dual pressures from a regional contact language and a national official language. By illuminating the tension between linguistic competence and ethnic identity among indigenous youth, the findings refine existing models of language ideology and intergenerational transmission.

A practical perspective, this research provides essential baseline data for community leaders, linguists, and educational policymakers working to design revitalization frameworks for Papuan languages. Understanding the ideological landscape of youth is a prerequisite for any intervention; revitalization initiatives that fail to align with the aspirations and social realities of the young generation are inevitably doomed to failure. By centering the voices of young Usku individuals, this study contributes to the preservation of Papua's extraordinary linguistic heritage at a critical juncture in its history.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the language attitudes, ideologies, and identity negotiations of the young diaspora generation of the Usku (Afra) ethnolinguistic community. A quantitative survey framework is particularly suitable for this investigation as it enables the systematic collection, quantification, and statistical evaluation of socio-psychological constructs across a geographically dispersed population (Slater & Hasson, 2024; Lim, 2024; Holtom et al., 2022). By capturing empirical data at a single point in time, this design provides a representative overview of prevailing language attitudes among young Usku descendants residing outside their traditional ancestral territory in the Senggi District of Keerom Regency, Papua.

Data Source and Population

The target population for this study comprises young diaspora individuals of Usku descent living in urban and peri-urban centers across Papua, surrounding regions, and the cities in Indonesia. Given that the ancestral Usku territory maintains a critically small resident population, the diaspora community represents an essential demographic for assessing the ongoing vitality, intergenerational transmission, and socio-cultural positioning of the language.

Participant recruitment was conducted using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques (Campbell et al., 2020; Magnone & Yeziarski, 2024). Purposive criteria required participants to self-identify as ethnic Usku descendants, belong to the young demographic cohort aged 15 to 35 years, and currently reside outside the primary Usku speech community in Senggi. Snowball sampling was subsequently leveraged by requesting initial community contacts and youth leaders to identify other eligible Usku diaspora members across their social networks.

The final sample consisted of N=173 valid respondents. In terms of demographic breakdown, 100 respondents identified as male (57.8 percent) and 73 respondents identified as female (42.2 percent). All participants provided informed consent prior to completing the survey, and anonymity was strictly preserved throughout the data collection process.

Instrument and Measurement

Data were gathered using a structured closed-ended questionnaire specifically operationalized to assess language attitudes, language ideologies, and ethnic identity among indigenous minority populations (Ghazanfar et al., 2025; Li & Wei, 2022). The instrument was constructed in Standard Indonesian to ensure high comprehension among respondents while accommodating varying levels of competence in the heritage language.

The questionnaire comprised three core operational sections, measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree): Cognitive Language Attitudes (5 items). Measured respondents' explicit beliefs regarding the socio-cultural value, intellectual status, and historical importance of the Usku language relative to Papuan Malay and Standard Indonesian.

Affective Language Attitudes (5 items): Evaluated respondents' emotional responses, feelings of pride, attachment, or linguistic stigma experienced when hearing or attempting to speak Usku in public and private domains. Behavioral and Conative Intentions (5 items): Assessed respondents' willingness to actively learn, practice, transmit, or support the preservation of Usku through digital media or community initiatives.

In addition to the tripartite attitude scales, a subscale measuring Ethnic Identity Strength (5 items) was adapted from Phinney's (1992) and, Ting & Abidin (2023) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) to assess the degree to which respondents connect heritage language fluency with their identity as ethnic Usku people. A socio-demographic section recorded age, gender, educational attainment, length of residence outside Senggi, and self-reported linguistic competence in Usku, Papuan Malay, and Standard Indonesian.

To establish content validity, the initial questionnaire draft was reviewed by two senior sociolinguists specializing in Papuan languages. Construct reliability was subsequently evaluated

using Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω). All subscales demonstrated high internal consistency, exceeding the standard threshold of 0.70 (Düzgün & Kırkıç, 2023).

Data Collection and Procedures

Data collection was executed over a four-month period. Due to the geographic dispersion of the Usku diaspora across various urban centers, a dual-mode administration strategy was implemented. An online survey hosted on a secure web platform was distributed through community social media groups, messaging networks, and youth association channels. For respondents residing in areas with limited internet connectivity, paper-based questionnaires were administered directly by trained field assistants.

Field assistants provided clear instructions regarding the purpose of the study and emphasized that participation was voluntary. To prevent response bias and ensure data integrity, respondents completed the survey independently. A total of 185 responses were gathered; following a thorough data screening process, 12 questionnaires were removed due to incomplete answers or straight-lining patterns, yielding a final dataset of 173 clean responses.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis was performed using JASP Statistics (Version 0.98.1), an open-source, peer-reviewed statistical software package widely recognized for its transparency, accuracy, and reproducible workflow (Love et al., 2019). The analytical pipeline followed a structured sequence (Figure 1).

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, median scores, frequencies, and percentages) were computed to establish baseline profiles for cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitude dimensions, as well as self-reported language competence.

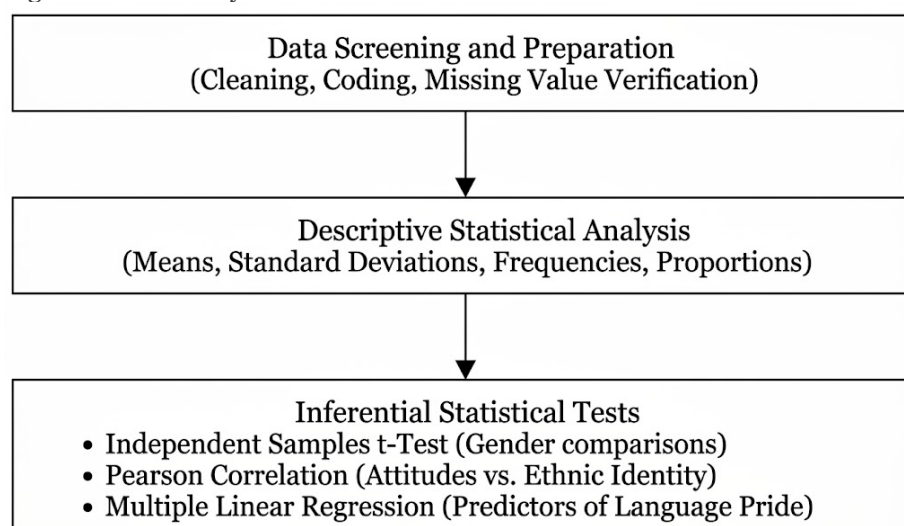
Inferential statistical analyses were conducted to address the primary research questions: **Independent Samples t-Tests:** Executed to examine whether significant differences existed between male ($n=100$) and female ($n=73$) diaspora youth regarding their cognitive, affective, and behavioral scores. Levene's test for equality of variances was applied, and Cohen's d was reported to estimate effect sizes.

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation: Utilized to evaluate the direction and strength of associations between language attitude dimensions, self-reported linguistic competence, and ethnic identity connection scores.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis: Employed to test the extent to which cognitive beliefs, affective feelings, and competence levels predict overall behavioral support for language preservation among the Usku diaspora youth.

Assumptions for parametric tests, including normality of distribution (Shapiro-Wilk test), homoscedasticity, and multi-collinearity (Variance Inflation Factor < 5), were systematically verified within JASP prior to reporting final statistical parameters.

Figure 1: Data Analysis Process Flow



Findings

The present study investigated the language attitudes, ideologies, and ethnic identity negotiations of the young Usku (Afra) diaspora generation (N=173). Data was statistically processed and evaluated using JASP Statistics. The empirical findings are organized into three primary thematic domains: descriptive profiles of language competence and attitudes, gender-based comparative analyses, and inferential models predicting identity and preservation behaviors (Figure 2).

Descriptive Profile of Language Competence and Attitudes

To establish a baseline profile of the Usku diaspora youth, self-reported linguistic competence across Usku, Papuan Malay, and Standard Indonesian was evaluated on a 5-point scale (1 = No Proficiency, 5 = Native/Fluent). The sample demonstrated a pronounced linguistic asymmetry.

As shown in Table 1, respondents reported near-universal fluency in Papuan Malay (M=4.82, SD=0.41) and Standard Indonesian (M=4.65, SD=0.53). Conversely, self-reported competence in the ancestral Usku language was markedly low (M=1.84, SD=0.76). Only 6.4 percent of the sample (n=11) reported productive oral fluency in Usku, whereas 68.2 percent (n=118) reported passive or non-existent competence.

Table 1: Self-Reported Linguistic Competence Among Usku Diaspora Youth (N=173)

Language Variety	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Median	Passive/Low (%)	Fluent (%)
Usku (Afra)	1.84	0.76	2.00	68.2%	6.4%
Papuan Malay	4.82	0.41	5.00	0.0%	94.8%
Standard Indonesian	4.65	0.53	5.00	0.6%	88.4%

Despite low linguistic competence, the tripartite attitude scale revealed an ideological divergence between cognitive evaluations and actual productive behavior. Table 2 summarizes the means and standard deviations across the three attitude dimensions and ethnic identity strength measured on a 1 to 5 scale.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Attitudinal Subscales and Ethnic Identity (N=173)

Construct Subscale	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Skewness	Kurtosis
Cognitive Attitude	4.21	0.62	-0.84	0.72
Affective Attitude	3.89	0.74	-0.51	-0.12
Behavioral Intention	3.12	0.88	-0.14	-0.65
Ethnic Identity Strength	4.35	0.58	-0.92	1.05

The cognitive attitudes toward Usku yielded a high mean score (M=4.21, SD=0.62), indicating that diaspora youth strongly acknowledge the historical, cultural, and scientific value of their heritage language. Affective attitudes were similarly positive (M=3.89, SD=0.74), reflecting emotional attachment and pride in their ancestral background. However, behavioral intentions scored substantially lower (M=3.12, SD=0.88). While youth express high ideological respect for Usku, their daily commitment to actively learning or speaking the language in diaspora contexts remains moderate to low.

Gender Differences in Language Attitudes and Identity

The independent samples t-test was executed in JASP to determine whether significant differences existed between male (n=100) and female (n=73) respondents across the measured variables (Table 3). Equality of variances was confirmed via Levene's test (p>.05 across all subscales).

Table 3: Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Male and Female Participants

Variable	Male (n=100) Mean (SD)	Female (n=73) Mean (SD)	t-value	df	p-value	Cohen's d
Cognitive Attitude	4.18 (0.65)	4.25 (0.58)	-0.73	171	.466	-0.11
Affective Attitude	3.76 (0.78)	4.07 (0.64)	-2.81	171	.006*	-0.43

Behavioral Intention	3.01 (0.91)	3.27 (0.82)	-1.95	171	.053	-0.30
Ethnic Identity	4.31 (0.61)	4.41 (0.53)	-1.13	171	.260	-0.17

Note: * Statistically significant at $p < .01$.

The results in Table 3 indicate a statistically significant gender difference in affective language attitudes, $t(171) = -2.81$, $p = .006$, with a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.43$). Female diaspora youth displayed higher affective scores ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.64$) compared to their male counterparts ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.78$), suggesting that young women experience stronger emotional attachment to the ancestral tongue despite living outside the core speech community. Cognitive attitudes ($p = .466$), behavioral intentions ($p = .053$), and ethnic identity strength ($p = .260$) showed no statistically significant differences between genders, indicating a shared ideological baseline across the diaspora sample.

Attitudes, Competence, and Ethnic Identity

To examine how language attitudes and self-reported competence correlate with ethnic identity connection, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated (Table 4).

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Measured Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Usku Competence	—				
2. Cognitive Attitude	.19*	—			
3. Affective Attitude	.34**	.52**	—		
4. Behavioral Intention	.41**	.46**	.58**	—	
5. Ethnic Identity	.12	.48**	.51**	.39**	—

As displayed in Table 4, ethnic identity strength correlated strongly and positively with cognitive attitudes ($r = .48$, $p < .001$) and affective attitudes ($r = .51$, $p < .001$). Crucially, self-reported Usku competence demonstrated no statistically significant correlation with ethnic identity strength ($r = .12$, $p = .116$). Diaspora youth maintain a high sense of Usku ethnic self-identification ($M = 4.35$) regardless of whether they possess productive fluency in the ancestral language. Usku competence did, however, correlate positively with affective attitudes ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) and behavioral intentions to preserve the language ($r = .41$, $p < .001$).

Predictors of Youth Preservation Intentions

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted in JASP to identify which factors significantly predict youth behavioral intentions toward language preservation ($N = 173$). The model included Usku competence, cognitive attitudes, affective attitudes, and gender as predictor variables (Table 5).

Table 5: Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Behavioral Preservation Intentions

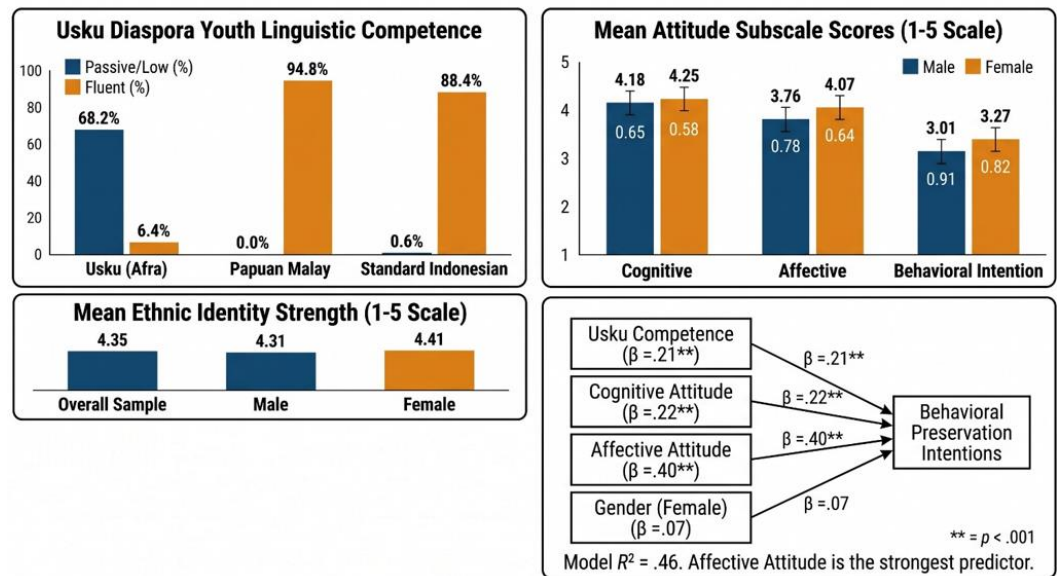
Predictor Model	Unstandardized B	Standard Error (SE)	Standardized β	t-value	p-value	VIF
Intercept	0.28	0.31	—	0.90	.368	—
Usku Competence	0.24	0.07	.21	3.38	.001**	1.18
Cognitive Attitude	0.31	0.09	.22	3.32	.001**	1.42
Affective Attitude	0.48	0.08	.40	5.89	< .001**	1.58
Gender (Female)	0.12	0.10	.07	1.18	.241	1.06

Note: Model $R = .68$, $R^2 = .46$, Adjusted $R^2 = .45$, $F(4,168) = 36.12$, $p < .001$.

The regression model accounted for 46 percent of the total variance in behavioral preservation intentions ($R^2 = .46$, $F(4,168) = 36.12$, $p < .001$). Multicollinearity was not present, as all Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) remained well below the 5.0 threshold. Affective attitude emerged as the strongest individual predictor of preservation intent ($\beta = .40$, $t = 5.89$, $p < .001$), followed by cognitive attitude ($\beta = .22$, $t = 3.32$, $p = .001$) and Usku linguistic competence ($\beta = .21$, $t = 3.38$, $p = .001$). Gender was not a statistically significant predictor within the multivariate model.

($\beta=.07$, $p=.241$). These statistical outputs indicate that emotional attachment and value perception are primary drivers shaping whether diaspora youth intend to engage with heritage language preservation efforts.

Figure 2: Overview of the Findings



Discussion

The overarching objective of this study was to examine the language attitudes, ideologies, and ethnic identity negotiations of the young Usku (Afra) diaspora generation ($N=173$). In light of the critical status of Usku as a moribund Papuan language isolate, understanding how geographically dispersed youth evaluate and position their ancestral language relative to dominant regional varieties is essential for both theoretical sociolinguistics and practical revitalization planning. This study addressed three core research questions regarding the nature of youth language attitudes across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, the gendered patterns of these attitudes, and the extent to which linguistic competence correlates with ethnic identity and preservation intentions.

The primary findings of this investigation centers on the pronounced asymmetry between self-reported linguistic competence and positive ideological evaluations. Granular examination of the descriptive data reveals that while 68.2 percent of respondents ($n=118$) possess low or passive competence in Usku ($M=1.84$, $SD=0.76$), their cognitive evaluations of the language remain exceptionally elevated ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.62$). This statistical divergence points to a significant socio-psychological phenomenon in language endangerment contexts: the decoupling of language ideology from daily communicative practice (Table 6).

Table 6: Granular Breakdown of Cognitive and Affective Items Across Competence Tiers

Survey Item / Dimension	Low Competence Tier ($n=118$) Mean (SD)	Fluent Competence Tier ($n=11$) Mean (SD)	Overall Sample ($N=173$) Mean (SD)
Cognitive: Historical Value	4.19 (0.64)	4.45 (0.52)	4.23 (0.61)
Cognitive: Identity Marker	4.22 (0.60)	4.36 (0.50)	4.25 (0.59)
Affective: Cultural Pride	3.81 (0.75)	4.36 (0.50)	3.92 (0.72)
Affective: Public Stigma	2.12 (0.82)	1.45 (0.52)	2.02 (0.80)
Behavioral: Daily Usage	2.64 (0.81)	4.18 (0.60)	2.81 (0.85)

As detailed in Table 6, even among the low competence tier, items measuring the perceived historical value of Usku ($M=4.19$) and its importance as a symbol of cultural heritage ($M=4.22$) scored exceptionally high. Conversely, daily behavioral usage among low competence youth remained constrained ($M=2.64$).

These results align closely with previous findings in indigenous sociolinguistics, which demonstrate that minoritized youth frequently express high symbolic loyalty to an ancestral tongue even as functional fluency slips away (Almalki et al., 2026; Chandras, 2023; Kroskrity, 2023; Sultana, 2021). The high cognitive mean suggests that diaspora youth do not harbor overt linguistic stigma toward Usku. Rather, the low behavioral score ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.88$) reflects a pragmatic response to the socio-ecological conditions of urban diaspora life, where Papuan Malay ($M=4.82$) and Standard Indonesian ($M=4.65$) function as the indispensable media for education, economic advancement, and inter-ethnic communication (Katubi et al., 2026).

An important and theoretically consequential outcome of this study is the non-significant correlation between self-reported Usku competence and ethnic identity strength ($r=.12$, $p=.116$). Standard models of reversing language shift traditionally posit that the loss of structural fluency directly precipitates an erosion of ethnic self-identification (Forsyth, 2025). The empirical evidence gathered from the Usku diaspora contradicts this classical assumption. Youth who possess no productive fluency in Usku reported ethnic identity strength scores ($M=4.35$, $SD=0.58$) that were statistically indistinguishable from the fluent minority ($M=4.45$, $SD=0.52$).

This result supports emerging scholarship on indigenous youth identity, which argues that young people in shifting speech communities increasingly construct their ethnic identity through non-linguistic cultural markers, shared ancestry, and symbolic affiliation rather than active linguistic performance (Crosnoe, 2021; Cittadini & R, 2025). In the context of the Papuan diaspora, young Usku individuals negotiate their identity by asserting their genealogical ties to the Senggi borderland and claiming ownership of Afra heritage, even while communicating exclusively in Papuan Malay.

However, an unexpected nuance emerges when examining the relationship between attitude dimensions and identity. While competence itself does not drive identity strength, cognitive attitudes ($r=.48$, $p<.001$) and affective attachment ($r=.51$, $p<.001$) correlate robustly with ethnic identity. Thus, it is the ideological valuation of the language, rather than operational fluency, that serves as the primary psychological anchor for ethnic self-identification among diaspora youth.

The inferential comparison between male ($n=100$) and female ($n=73$) respondents revealed a statistically significant gender effect specifically within the affective domain, $t(171)=-2.81$, $p=.006$, with women demonstrating higher emotional attachment ($M=4.07$) than men ($M=3.76$). Item level analysis sheds light on the precise locus of this variation (Table 7).

Table 7: Item-Level Gender Comparison for Affective Attitude Subscale

Affective Survey Item	Male Mean (SD)	Female Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Feel proud when hearing Usku	3.88 (0.81)	4.22 (0.68)	-2.91	.004**
Feel emotional connection to ancestral songs	3.71 (0.85)	4.11 (0.72)	-3.28	.001**
Feel comfortable speaking Usku in public	3.65 (0.89)	3.88 (0.80)	-1.74	.084

As shown in Table 7, the gender disparity is driven primarily by items capturing emotional resonance with cultural expressions ($p=.001$) and personal pride ($p=.004$), whereas comfort in public speech showed no significant difference ($p=.084$).

This finding both supports and refines broader sociolinguistic literature regarding gendered roles in language shift. Studies in European and Latin American contexts often report that young indigenous women shift away from heritage languages faster than men due to higher social mobility aspirations (Bennett, 2020; Smith-Hefner, 2009). Conversely, in many Melanesian societies, women frequently act as key custodians of familial and intergenerational socio-cultural ties (Skelly et al., 2025). The higher affective scores among young Usku women suggest that within the diaspora, females maintain a stronger emotional guardianship over heritage traditions. This socio-affective orientation offers a critical point of leverage for future community based preservation initiatives.

The multiple linear regression model yielded important insights into the drivers of youth preservation behaviors ($R^2=.46$, $F(4,168)=36.12$, $p<.001$). Affective attitude emerged as the single most powerful predictor of behavioral preservation intent ($\beta=.40$, $p<.001$), exerting nearly double the predictive influence of cognitive attitude ($\beta=.22$, $p=.001$) and structural linguistic competence ($\beta=.21$, $p=.001$).

This hierarchy of predictors offers a compelling explanation for how youth engagement functions in endangered language isolates. Logical arguments regarding the scientific uniqueness or isolate status of Usku (cognitive dimension) are insufficient on their own to motivate active preservation behaviors among youth. Similarly, possessing passive linguistic knowledge (competence) does not automatically translate into a willingness to engage in language revitalization. Instead, emotional resonance, personal pride, and affective security are the crucial catalysts that transform passive ideological goodwill into active behavioral commitments.

While these empirical findings provide clear insights, several methodological constraints require cautious interpretation. The study relied on self-reported measures of linguistic competence rather than objective clinical or diagnostic language assessments. Self-evaluations in endangered language contexts can be subject to overestimation due to social desirability bias or underestimation due to linguistic insecurity when comparing oneself to fluent elders (Ghazanfar et al., 2025; Li & Wei, 2022).

The sample was restricted to diaspora youth residing in urban and peri-urban centers ($N=173$). While this demographic is essential for studying shift under migration conditions, the findings cannot be generalized uncritically to the remaining resident population in Senggi District, where daily language contact patterns and access to fluent elders differ significantly.

The theoretical and practical implications of this research are substantial. Methodologically, the study demonstrates that sociolinguistic investigations of moribund Papuan isolates must look beyond descriptive grammar to evaluate the ideological landscapes of younger generations. Theoretically, the findings support the general hypothesis that under conditions of severe language endangerment, indigenous youth decouple linguistic fluency from ethnic identity, adopting a symbolic mode of heritage identification.

Practically, these results offer clear guidance for language documentation and revitalization efforts in Papua. Traditional language revitalization frameworks that focus strictly on formal grammar instruction or classroom learning often fail because they treat language as a purely cognitive instrument. The overwhelming predictive strength of affective attitudes ($\beta=.40$) indicates that revitalization initiatives for Usku must prioritize emotionally engaging, culturally immersive domains. Digital archiving, youth-led media projects, music, and oral storytelling platforms that foster cultural pride are far more likely to mobilize the diaspora generation than abstract grammatical codification.

To build upon the empirical baseline established in this study, future research should pursue three main directions: (1) Comparative Resident versus Diaspora Studies: Future investigations should conduct parallel sociolinguistic surveys comparing diaspora youth with youth living in the core Senggi speech community to isolate the specific impact of urban migration on language attitudes. (2) Objective Competence Testing: Researchers should incorporate objective elicitation tasks and narrative production tests alongside self-report scales to map structural language attrition against ideological attitudes at a more fine-grained level. (3) Longitudinal Action Research: Intervention studies should design and evaluate youth-led digital revitalization programs, tracking whether targeting affective attitudes produces measurable increases in productive language use over time.

Conclusion

This study provides an empirical investigation into the language attitudes, ideologies, and ethnic identity negotiations of the young diaspora generation of the Usku (Afra) community ($N=173$), an endangered Papuan language isolate. By applying quantitative survey methods and inferential statistical modeling via JASP, the research sheds light on the socio-psychological dynamics shaping language vitality under conditions of urban migration and severe language shift.

The empirical findings yield three primary conclusions. First, there is a pronounced structural disconnect between language competence and cognitive-affective valuation. Although

self-reported functional fluency in Usku is remarkably low ($M=1.84$), diaspora youth maintain exceptionally high cognitive respect ($M=4.21$) and strong affective pride ($M=3.89$) toward their ancestral tongue, demonstrating that structural attrition does not automatically equate to ideological rejection. Second, the study demonstrates that active linguistic competence is not a prerequisite for ethnic self-identification among diaspora youth; structural fluency showed no statistically significant correlation with ethnic identity strength ($r=.12$, $p=.116$). Instead, ethnic identity is anchored in the ideological and affective valuation of heritage roots. Third, regression modeling revealed that affective attachment is the single most powerful predictor of youth intentions to engage in language preservation ($\beta=.40$, $p<.001$), outranking both cognitive evaluation and baseline linguistic competence.

These conclusions carry significant theoretical and practical implications for sociolinguistics and language documentation in Papua and across the wider Pacific region. Theoretically, the results challenge classical models of language shift that view fluency loss as a direct precursor to identity erosion, proving that indigenous youth in diaspora settings adaptively reconfigure heritage language as a symbolic marker of ethnic identity. Practically, the findings indicate that traditional, grammar-focused language revitalization frameworks are ill-suited for mobilizing younger generations. To be effective, community leaders, educators, and policy makers must design revitalization strategies that target the affective domain through culturally immersive, digital, and youth-driven platforms that foster emotional resonance and collective pride.

Ultimately, the survival of Usku (Afra) as a living element of Papua's unique linguistic mosaic depends not merely on passive archival documentation, but on the active socio-emotional alignment of its youngest descendants. By demonstrating that diaspora youth hold strong ideological loyalty despite severe fluency loss, this study affirms that the human drive to retain cultural heritage remains resilient even in the face of rapid modern displacement. Equipping this young generation with accessible, emotionally meaningful avenues to reconnect with their heritage tongue represents the most viable path toward ensuring that the voice of Afra does not fall silent.

Ethics approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Competing interests

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Underlying data

The data supporting the conclusion of this article is available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized Copilot and Grammarly solely to improve language clarity and readability. These tools were not used to generate scientific content, perform data analysis, or draw conclusions. All AI-assisted edits were thoroughly reviewed and verified by the authors to maintain the integrity and accuracy of the work. The authors assume full responsibility for the final content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this article.

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