

Research Article

# Linguistic Diversity in the Tanzanian 2020 General Elections: Experience from Nyamagana and Misungwi Districts

Kasara Belias Ngoboka<sup>1</sup>, Eustard Rutalemwa Tibategeza<sup>2</sup> ,  
Nasibu Musa Kalokola<sup>1,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Languages and Linguistics, The St. Augustine University of Tanzania, Mwanza, Tanzania

<sup>2</sup>Department of Language and Communication Skills, University of Iringa, Iringa, Tanzania

## Abstract

Globally, multilingual societies face significant linguistic challenges. In these societies, one language often enjoys linguistic freedom and dominance, while indigenous languages and their speakers experience the agony of marginalization. In some communities, indigenous languages seem to be increasingly out of use. In this context, this paper examined linguistic diversity in Tanzania. Linguistic diversity poses significant challenges to equitable voter engagement in Tanzania's electoral processes. This study explores how language impacted the 2020 General Election, focusing on the roles, challenges, and implications of linguistic diversity. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary reviews conducted in Nyamagana and Misungwi districts. The findings reveal that while Kiswahili served as a unifying language during the election, its dominance marginalized indigenous language speakers, particularly in rural areas where limited Kiswahili proficiency hindered access to critical electoral information. Respondents emphasised the need for linguistic inclusivity to ensure equitable representation and engagement. The study concludes that integrating indigenous languages alongside Kiswahili in electoral communication would bridge communication gaps, enhance voter engagement, and strengthen the democratic process by making it more accessible to Tanzania's diverse linguistic communities.

## Keywords

Linguistic Diversity, Election, Electorates, Language Policy, Multilingualism, Linguistic Inclusivity

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the issue of linguistic diversity in Tanzania, specifically focusing on roles of Kiswahili and indigenous languages, challenges, and implications in the context of the 2020 General Elections. After gaining independence, Tanzania embarked on a path towards linguistic freedom. Kiswahili was declared the national and official language, giving it a prestigious position over the country's

other indigenous languages. Tanzania is characterized by remarkable linguistic diversity, with approximately 150 indigenous languages spoken across the country. Research studies [7, 16, 17, 20, 25, 27, 38, 39] reveal that Kiswahili does not dominate communication in all contexts. In rural areas, indigenous languages play a vital role, serving as a unique and essential linguistic tapestry for these communities.

\*Corresponding author: musanasibu@yahoo.com (Nasibu Musa Kalokola)

**Received:** 23 January 2025; **Accepted:** 8 February 2025; **Published:** 11 March 2025



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These languages remain the backbone of communication, especially in both formal and informal settings.

In an effort to promote Kiswahili, the government has strongly emphasized its use during elections. However, this approach often overlooks communities where Kiswahili is either rarely used or poorly understood, creating barriers to effective communication and participation in the electoral process. This paper proposes the integration and accommodation of linguistic diversity in elections to foster inclusivity. Specifically, the paper critically examines the prioritisation of Kiswahili at the expense of indigenous languages and delves into the experiences of communities during the 2020 General Election. The research adopts a reconstructive approach, drawing on data collected from previous elections to analyse the implications of linguistic diversity on electoral processes.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for the Independent National Electoral Commission. It offers viable alternatives and suggestions for accommodating linguistic diversity to ensure effective and inclusive democratic participation in future elections.

## 2. Background to the Problem

The 2020 Tanzania general elections sparked significant debates, particularly regarding language of election and linguistic inclusivity. Tanzania is renowned for its richness in terms of linguistic diversity with more than 150 indigenous languages spoken within the country [26]. Kiswahili enjoys a prestigious position over the other indigenous languages spoken within the country. Kiswahili is regarded as a national and official language along with English [38, 40, 41]. Traditionally, Tanzania's election campaigns have been conducted in Kiswahili, the national language [8]. This choice is politically motivated, rooted in the belief that Kiswahili fosters national unity and solidarity. The government and political elites assume that promoting a single national language helps to avoid the potential divisions and conflicts that could arise from using multiple indigenous languages. This political fear of tribalism prevents the government from taking steps to incorporate indigenous languages into the electoral process. By restricting the use of these languages, many communities are marginalized, unable to fully participate in the political discourse and decision-making processes. The exclusion of indigenous languages not only hinders informed voter participation but also disregards the linguistic diversity that is a fundamental aspect of Tanzania's cultural heritage.

The effectiveness of using only Kiswahili in elections is further questioned as it fails to acknowledge and accommodate the linguistic diversity of the electorate. Addressing these fears and promoting a more inclusive language policy could enhance democratic engagement and ensure that all citizens, regardless of their linguistic background, have equal access to political information and the ability to participate fully in elections. In recent years, linguistic inclusivity in elections has become a key concern, particularly regarding the use of

indigenous languages in campaigns [13]. Scholars [34] argue that indigenous languages are essential for effective communication within ethnic communities, likening their use to a mother's natural milk, which is pure and beneficial.

In addressing the linguistic needs of indigenous communities, several African countries are beginning to take steps to accommodate and promote linguistic diversity. In Kenya, for example, [9] highlights the importance of indigenous languages in preserving cultural identity, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring equitable access to information in a multilingual society. He critiques language policies in many African countries that prioritize foreign or dominant languages, resulting in the marginalization of indigenous tongues. He argues that incorporating indigenous languages into public life not only preserves cultural heritage but also enables communities to participate more actively in democratic processes. [11] further examines the linguistic hierarchy in Kenya, where English and Kiswahili enjoy a prestigious status while indigenous languages are often marginalized. According to him, these indigenous languages are overshadowed by official and dominant languages, and this neglect relegates them to the background, putting them at risk of becoming "dead" languages over time. Such marginalization not only impacts language preservation but also affects the daily lives of those who rely on these languages for communication. Indigenous languages are intricately tied to the immediate needs and cultural practices of their speakers, and their exclusion from public discourse and official domains effectively alienates speakers from critical societal conversations and decision-making. Scholars such as [9, 11] emphasize the need for ongoing use of indigenous languages to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of their communities. They advocate for policies that support the sustained use of these languages, ensuring that they remain vital, relevant, and accessible in public life. Similarly, [1] highlight that Kenya has taken a step forward in accommodating linguistic diversity. They emphasize the country's linguistic richness, with nearly 41 indigenous languages, many of which are used in pre-primary education and media. However, the scholars argue that there is a need to expand the formal and official use of these languages to ensure their continued development and relevance.

In Nigeria, [15] points to the country's linguistic diversity, comprising over 400 indigenous languages, most of which remain undeveloped. He argues that the reliance on foreign languages creates challenges in education and entrepreneurship and advocates for the integration of indigenous languages into formal sectors to foster national development, as seen in other nations. According to [23], South Africa's approach to linguistic diversity during elections exemplifies how English, Afrikaans, and indigenous languages can coexist within an electoral context. By allowing communities to use their indigenous languages alongside English and Afrikaans, South Africa fosters balanced representation and inclusivity. This approach supports language development and communication, respecting linguistic diversity while ensuring broad engage-

ment across linguistic groups.

The experiences from Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa showcase various efforts to preserve, promote, and integrate indigenous languages. While these countries still have a long way to go to achieve full linguistic freedom, there has been notable progress. Indigenous languages are increasingly being used in formal domains: in education and media in Kenya, in elections in South Africa, and in entrepreneurship in Nigeria. These developments represent significant steps towards recognizing and strengthening the role of indigenous languages in African societies.

On the case of Tanzania, some researchers have clearly addressed the role of indigenous languages vis-a-vis Kiswahili in rural and urban areas. They clearly state that although Kiswahili is the national language, it is still not understood across all areas in Tanzania. Various research studies [21, 25, 28, 39] show that there are some communities and individuals in Tanzania who may have limited proficiency or struggle with using Kiswahili, particularly in the remote areas. [4] pinpoints that Kiswahili is not the dominant language in all areas in Tanzania. He argues that the predominance of Kiswahili is in the urban areas while in rural areas, there is limited proficiency. It is undeniable that many Tanzanians still use their indigenous languages in their daily communication. For example, indigenous languages are used more frequently in rural areas compared to Kiswahili. To justify this argument, [17] addresses the issue of linguistic inclusivity in rural areas, stating that indigenous languages dominate communication in both formal and informal settings.

The predominance use of indigenous languages over Kiswahili in rural areas is not accidental. [27] states that indigenous languages serve as a catalyst, especially when communities or groups of people engage in economic activities like fishing and farming in rural areas. When songs are sung in indigenous languages, they unite workers and boost their morale to work together diligently. It is evident that such languages still stand out as hopes, dreams, and linguistic backbone of some communities. Such studies challenge the popular belief and assumptions that Kiswahili is universally known and used in all regions in the country.

It is indubitably and an undeniable fact that indigenous languages carry the linguistic identity of a particular society. These languages play a crucial role as they are used as a tool for humans to participate in social, economic, political, religious, and other activities. Indigenous languages are an integral part of culture and heritage. They carry within them the history, traditions and wisdom passed down through generations. Preservation and promotion of these languages aim to ensure that the cultural tapestry of humanity remains vibrant and diverse. Therefore, restricting their use would mean losing a significant part of this cultural heritage, leading to erosion of unique identity and tradition. Restricting people from using their languages is considered an injustice and a violation of their linguistic rights.

The government has consistently emphasized the use of

Kiswahili and English as the only official languages. There are various reasons making the government to restrict the use of indigenous languages in various activities. These reasons include the fear of fostering tribalism and using tribal languages for activities that do not benefit the nation [26]. Language experts [16, 20, 25, 27, 30] view these reasons as baseless and illogical. They emphasize that people should be allowed to use their indigenous languages.

In his study, Kahigi argues that Kiswahili plays a crucial role as a national language in Tanzania, serving as a unifying force among diverse ethnic groups in the country. However, [16] emphasizes the importance of preserving and promoting indigenous languages in Tanzania as they are an integral part of the country's heritage and integration. The languages carry unique linguistic features and expressions that reflect the history, traditions and values of specific communities. Thus, language is not merely a means of communication but also a carrier of cultural values, traditions and history.

In a multilingual society like Tanzania, national identity is not solely based on the official language but also on the diversity of indigenous languages. Recognizing, valuing and embracing this linguistic diversity can celebrate a rich linguistic heritage and promote pride among citizens regardless of their language.

However, in Tanzania, language policy is often influenced by elites and politicians who assume Kiswahili's universality [22, 31, 35]. They believe Kiswahili is a national language common to all, a first language, a symbol of unity, and superior, while viewing indigenous languages as a threat to national unity [35]. Yet, with over 150 ethnic languages in Tanzania [26], many communities do not consider Kiswahili their primary language. In some areas, Kiswahili is rarely used, making its sole use in elections problematic. Researchers like [19] argue for the equality of all languages, advocating for the right to receive information in one's own language to ensure informed decision-making. The primary objective guiding this study was to examine the roles of Kiswahili and indigenous languages in the Tanzanian 2020 General Elections.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The study employed sociolinguistics theory to addresses the convergence between language and society. It pinpoints the way language serves as a tool for individual, community and national identity. The theory argues that identity construction and negotiation is manifested in language. This theory delves into the relationship between language and society, focusing on the social functions of language and linguistic variations within communities [14]. Also, the theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, deriving their self-identity from these group memberships. Furthermore, the theory acknowledges the fluidity between different social identities, suggesting that individuals may navigate between linguistic identities in the political arena [10]. This fluidity manifests in voters switching between identifying with their

indigenous language group and a broader national identity depending on the political context, impacting electoral dynamics. The sociolinguistics theoretical underpinnings converge with specific objectives of this study. On the case of effectiveness of using language (s), the theory argues that there is a profound connection between language and identity [10]. This means that language contributes to detailed character portraits, and serves both practical and symbolic purposes. The effective use of language is explored within social and political contexts, challenging notions of linguistic correctness and revealing the complex role of language in shaping social identities. To assess the effective use of Kiswahili as the language of election, it's important to consider the profound connection between language and identity. This is because language plays a crucial role in shaping social identities, contributing to detailed character portraits, and serving both practical and symbolic purposes.

The theory argues that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups [14]. It proposes that individuals derive their self-identity from social group memberships. In the context of Tanzania's 2020 General Election, this theory can be applied to explore how linguistic diversity influences social identity and political affiliations. The linguistic landscape comprising both Kiswahili and indigenous languages becomes a salient factor in shaping the social identity of various ethnic groups participating in the election. This study intends to employ Socio-linguistic theory.

## 4. Literature Review

Different scholars have conducted research related to language issues. These scholars have investigated and addressed issues related to the position and role of indigenous languages in multilingual societies such as Tanzania. [2] argues that the effectiveness of using the language in different socio-cultural, educational, and economic aspects can be evaluated by considering the way it accommodates the linguistic diversity within a society. That is to say, the linguistic diversity and respect of indigenous languages should be considered. In elections, the policy must enhance effective communication among citizens. In a complementary exploration, [43] focuses on the critical role of indigenous languages in education. The central question revolves around the effectiveness of utilizing these languages. He argues that indigenous languages are deeply intertwined with the cultural identity of communities. By using these languages, individuals can better connect with the cultural heritage of their community, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. Research suggests that the use of indigenous languages accelerates and enhances communication.

He argues that language policy should consider indigenous languages to shape the linguistic landscape of a society. [3]. A language policy should recognize and promote indigenous languages, affirming their cultural and historical significance. This recognition can contribute to the preservation and re-

talization of indigenous languages. Effective language policies consider the linguistic diversity within a society, ensuring that indigenous languages are included in official communications and public discourse. [3] is of the view that if language policies prioritize a single dominant language, such as the use of Kiswahili as the only language in elections, they can marginalize indigenous languages, leading to a decline in usage and potential language endangerment. In a similar vein, [17] advocates for the consideration of indigenous language in the policy, emphasizing their role in ensuring equal linguistic rights, especially in elections. The theory and studies from these scholars provided a fundamental ground for meeting the research objective which mainly focused on examining the roles of Kiswahili and indigenous languages in the Tanzanian 2020 General Elections.

## 5. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, chosen for its ability to provide in-depth insights into the subject matter, and utilized a descriptive research design. The study was conducted in Tanzania's Mwanza region, the research focused on Nyamagana (Luchebele ward) and Misungwi (Idetemya ward) to ensure rural-urban representation. The study targeted electorates, political analysts, and politicians, with participants selected through simple random and purposive sampling techniques, resulting in a total sample size of 20: 10 electorates (five from each ward), six political leaders (three from each ward), and four political analysts. Data collection methods included interviews with key informants (6 political leaders and 4 political analysts), focus group discussions with two groups of electorates (5 participants per group), and documentary review of key policy documents such as the Cultural Policy of 1997, the Education and Training Policy of 1995, the Education Policy of 2014, and the Declaration of Election Ethics of 2020. This combination of methods ensured a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the research topic. The data was collected from July to August, 2024.

## 6. Findings and Discussions

### 6.1. The Role of Kiswahili and Indigenous Languages in the Tanzanian 2020 General Elections

The objective of this study was to examine the use of Kiswahili and indigenous languages in the Tanzanian 2020 General Elections. Various perspectives were provided by respondents, including electorates, political analysts, and political leaders, regarding the use of Kiswahili and indigenous languages in Tanzania's 2020 General Elections. The respondents indicated that Kiswahili played crucial role during the 2020 General Election campaign. The findings from



focus group discussion revealed that the use of Kiswahili as a national language fostered unity among the electorates. Regarding this, one of the electorates said, "Kiswahili as the national language fostered unity and facilitated meaningful electoral participation between electorates and candidates from our community. This led to effective participation in the electoral process. "The statement from respondent highlights how Kiswahili, as a national language, played a key role in uniting diverse communities during the 2020 General Election campaign. It clearly shows that Kiswahili facilitated communication between electorates and candidates, allowing electorates from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to engage meaningfully in the political process. The idea that Kiswahili, as a national language, facilitates unity and community engagement is supported by different scholars. [5] asserts that Kiswahili is chosen as the language of election due to its unifying role. He emphasizes that Kiswahili's widespread use and acceptance across different ethnic groups make it an ideal medium for electoral communication.

It was also found that Kiswahili facilitated effective communication during the 2020 General Elections. One of the electorates during focus group discussion highlighted the significant role Kiswahili played in election. The respondent emphasized that Kiswahili was instrumental in enabling meaningful discussions among voters. The respondent stated, "Kiswahili served as the primary medium for facilitating effective communication between electorates. Using this language enabled us to participate in meaningful discussions about the elections." This sentiment reflects a shared understanding among respondents that the widespread use of Kiswahili contributed to creating a more inclusive electoral environment. As a language, it enabled voters from different linguistic groups to participate in the election process. This perspective aligns with [16] views, which emphasize that Kiswahili's status as a national language contributes significantly to its effectiveness in national matters. He highlights that Kiswahili's broad reach and acceptance make it a crucial tool for fostering national unity and ensuring comprehensive representation. This idea is further supported by [6] who underscore that Kiswahili, as a national language, is common to all and facilitates collective participation across different social and linguistic backgrounds.

Moreover, the political analysts during the interview emphasized the pivotal role Kiswahili played during the 2020 General Elections. The respondents noted that in social gatherings, the widespread use of Kiswahili facilitated mutual understanding among community members. One of the political analysts affirmed:

Kiswahili played a pivotal role as the primary and most effective communication tool during the 2020 General Elections. In social gatherings, the widespread use of Kiswahili facilitated mutual understanding among us. Although many indigenous languages are spoken in our communities, Kiswahili served as a unifying linguistic force, which we referred to as a linguistic bridge (Interview,

21<sup>st</sup> August, 2024).

The findings revealed that Kiswahili connected electorates and contestants from diverse linguistic communities, bringing them into a common shared linguistic melting pot which is Kiswahili. As a result, the use of Kiswahili made electoral information more accessible to a wider audience, reinforcing its role as the national linguistic voice that transcended ethnic and linguistic divides. [33] highlights that, in Tanzania, most children acquire Kiswahili alongside their indigenous languages, establishing it as a primary tool for communication. On the other hand, political leaders shared their insights on how they used Kiswahili as a unifying linguistic tool to express their ideas, manifestos, and policies. One of the political leaders stated:

Kiswahili enabled political leaders and candidates to effectively communicate their ideas and policies to a wide audience, ensuring that their messages reached and resonated with a diverse electorate's base. This widespread comprehension helped bridge divides and created a more cohesive national dialogue, which was vital for a functioning democracy (Interview, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2024).

The statement underscores the role of Kiswahili as a unifying language, facilitating clear communication between political leaders and a diverse electorate. By ensuring widespread understanding, Kiswahili fostered national cohesion and contributed to the democratic process by bridging linguistic divides.

It was reported that the use of Kiswahili simplified access to information for everyone, regardless of linguistic background. Respondent emphasized that using Kiswahili in elections ensured broad accessibility to crucial information for all citizens. Kiswahili's status as a widely spoken language in Tanzania made it an effective medium for disseminating important information, thereby reducing language barriers in the electoral process. [29] underscores this by stating that Kiswahili unites voters from different linguistic backgrounds, reducing linguistic tensions and fostering national unity.

Given the fact that the respondents emphasized the effectiveness of Kiswahili during the elections, they also expressed concerns about the role and use of indigenous languages throughout the electoral process. This issue became a significant focus for the researcher, who sought to understand the position of indigenous languages in the 2020 General Elections.

First, the researcher asked the respondents whether they were aware that Kiswahili was the only official language used for communication during the entire election. The goal was to assess if the respondents understood that Kiswahili was the only permitted language for electoral communication. During a focus group discussion, one electorate remarked, "The widespread familiarity and prestigious status of Kiswahili as a national language has naturally overshadowed indigenous languages, which is why other languages were not used for communication". The respondent assumed that the preference for Kiswahili over indigenous languages was a choice rather

than a policy guiding politicians. So, it became clear to the researcher that many respondents were unaware of the official election regulations that prohibit the use of indigenous languages in electoral communication.

The researcher reviewed the 2020 Election Ethics document. The researcher examined this document to assess how language is addressed within it. This document stresses:

“2.1 (a). To respect and adhere to the Constitution of the country, electoral laws, election regulations, the electoral code of conduct, and the directives of the National Electoral Commission, as well as other laws of the country throughout the election period” (URT, 2020, p. 8).

Also, in section 21 (k) of the policy states that it should ensure that Kiswahili is the only language used in election campaigns. In situations where Kiswahili is not understood and it becomes necessary, the candidate will speak in Kiswahili, and an interpreter will translate into the language understood by the respective community [42].

It was found out that the election ethics [42] strictly mandated Kiswahili as the only language to be used in election campaigns. It provided a room for translation into indigenous languages only when it was necessary and through interpreters. This provision reflected a legal and institutional framework that limited the use of indigenous languages in the electoral process. Furthermore, while the inclusion of interpreters to bridge the language gap offers a solution, this approach presents practical challenges. Interpretation during campaigns can affect the spontaneity of communication, creating barriers to direct interaction between candidates and voters. The finding indicates that the Election Ethics of the 2020 Tanzanian General Election were not inclusive to all linguistic communities. The respondents believe that decisions about language use were made without considering the diverse linguistic needs of the population. In an interview with one of the political leaders stated:

Community linguistic demands should be respected. Announcements and participation need to be communicated in a language that people understand. The decision to use only Kiswahili as the medium of communication was made by a small group of people without consulting the wider public. The community needs to understand that all languages are equal, and everyone has the right to receive and share information in the language they understand best (Interview, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2024).

This statement highlights the importance of linguistic inclusivity, stressing that decisions about language use in elections should involve public consultation and respect for all languages to ensure that everyone can participate fully in the democratic process. This idea is further strengthened by [37], who stress that the use of indigenous languages as a tool for communication is not only a fundamental linguistic right but also a fundamental human right. These languages hold invaluable intrinsic value, as they represent cultural identity, social inclusion, and political participation. [24] cautions against the marginalization of indigenous languages. He ar-

gues that the promotion of a single dominant language may inadvertently threaten linguistic diversity. In the context of the 2020 General Election, while Kiswahili fostered participation and unity among voters, there remains a valid concern that this linguistic dominance alienated speakers of indigenous languages, especially in rural areas.

## 6.2. Promoting the Use of Indigenous Languages

Although the policy did not allow for the use of indigenous languages, it was found that they were still used. Upon conducting interviews, the respondents provided insightful perspectives, particularly contrasting the use of indigenous languages with the exclusive use of Kiswahili as the medium of communication. One of the political analysts affirmed that:

Indigenous languages were used to address the linguistic needs of our communities that were not proficient in Kiswahili. When our indigenous languages were employed, it facilitated better comprehension and understanding among us. The use of these languages not only facilitated comprehension but also strengthened our emotional connection and loyalty (Interview, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2024).

The statement emphasizes the crucial role of indigenous languages in improving communication and fostering emotional connections among communities not proficient in Kiswahili. It suggests that by addressing linguistic needs, indigenous languages help bridge the gap for non-Kiswahili speakers, leading to better comprehension, particularly in rural areas. It is also noted that the use of indigenous languages strengthens social bonds, promoting solidarity, cultural pride, and inclusivity, thereby ensuring that all linguistic groups feel valued and respected. This aligns with [34], who emphasize that indigenous languages are essential for effective communication. Using indigenous languages ensures that messages are accurately conveyed and understood within communities, fostering deeper connections and trust.

It was found that the use of indigenous languages in the 2020 General Elections played a pivotal role in fostering meaningful participation among diverse linguistic communities. Some political leaders asserted that when they failed to use indigenous languages, indigenous speakers did not even pay attention to what they said. Leaders who used these languages earned greater respect and trust, as they demonstrated cultural sensitivity and an appreciation for the voters' linguistic heritage. The good reputation and goodwill associated with using indigenous languages were evident. One of the electorates shared this view:

The use of indigenous languages in the 2020 General Elections significantly enhanced participation. We showed greater respect to political leaders and candidates who spoke our language because they demonstrated cultural sensitivity and appreciation for our linguistic heritage. As a result, it cultivated a sense of belonging and boosted our morale to actively participate in the election (Focus Group Discussion, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2024).

The respondents emphasized that the use of indigenous languages in the 2020 General Elections played a pivotal role in increasing voter participation. They reported that political leaders and candidates who utilized indigenous languages garnered greater respect from the electorates, as this demonstrated cultural sensitivity and recognition of their linguistic heritage.

It was also found that voters felt valued when their indigenous languages were used. According to these respondents, the acknowledgement of their language fostered a stronger sense of belonging and inclusivity, which in turn motivated and boosted their morale to engage more actively in the electoral process. One electorate stated, "When our own language was used, it made us feel valued and included in the election." This quotation highlights the emotional and psychological impact of linguistic inclusivity, showing how the use of indigenous languages foster a sense of belonging and motivate increased voter participation in the electoral process. This statement aligns with [17] suggests that indigenous languages dominate communication in both formal and informal settings in rural areas, emphasizing that the use of these languages in social gatherings helps to make information more accessible to their speakers. Similarly, [4] research indicates that Kiswahili is not dominant in all areas, particularly rural ones, where indigenous languages prevail in communication. This highlights the need for linguistic inclusivity in both formal and informal spaces, as well as the importance of indigenous languages in promoting voter engagement in rural communities. As suggested by the respondents that the use of indigenous languages encouraged them to engage more actively in the electoral process.

The findings reveal that indigenous languages are a vital part of the cultural tapestry and linguistic identity of communities. During an interview, one of the political analysts affirmed:

Incorporating indigenous languages into elections promoted the recognition of our linguistic identity. Although it was rare for our languages to be used, when they were, it made us feel more valued and involved in the electoral process. This was because it made it much easier for us to access information (Interview, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2024).

The respondent emphasized that incorporating indigenous languages into elections promoted the recognition of their linguistic identity, even though these languages were rarely used in election campaign. The respondent highlighted that when indigenous languages were employed, electorates felt more valued and included in the electoral process. Furthermore, the use of these languages simplified access to crucial electoral information, enabling indigenous language speakers to participate more meaningfully. According to the respondents, this accessibility fostered a greater sense of involvement and facilitated informed participation, particularly for those who may have been excluded due to language barriers. This aligns with [27], who stresses that although most Tanzanians speak Kiswahili, it is an undeniable fact that many in rural

areas continue to use indigenous languages in their daily lives. When these languages are incorporated into the electoral process, it ensures that all citizens, regardless of their linguistic background, feel included and valued in the democratic process. This recognition not only enhances participation but also affirms the cultural identity of diverse communities, reinforcing the idea that effective electoral communication must address the multilingual nature of the electorate to foster genuine engagement and representation.

It was found that the utilization of indigenous languages ensured that messages were clearly articulated, interpreted, and delivered. One of the electorates in the focus group discussion asserted, "Some candidates used our indigenous languages when they were campaigning. They did this to ensure that the campaign messages were properly interpreted and clearly understood. This approach significantly reduced communication barriers among us and running candidates". The respondent emphasized that some candidates made deliberate efforts to use indigenous languages during their campaigns, ensuring that their messages were accurately interpreted and clearly understood by voters who were not proficient in Kiswahili. This strategic use of indigenous languages reduced communication barriers, fostering a more inclusive and effective campaign environment. By using these languages, candidates were able to connect more deeply with indigenous communities, enhancing mutual understanding and trust. This approach likely contributed to stronger participation, particularly among indigenous language speakers. These arguments align with [27], who stresses that in rural areas, indigenous languages play a crucial role in enhancing comprehension and participation in political processes. He argues that using these languages allows indigenous populations to fully grasp the nuances of political messages, which might otherwise be lost due to linguistic barriers. [21] also emphasizes the urgent need for indigenous speakers to continually use their indigenous languages. This helps to maintain cultural identity while ensuring political inclusion.

It was found that the exclusive use of Kiswahili, sidelining indigenous languages in elections, resulted in the marginalization of these languages. One of the political analysts argued that:

The exclusive use of Kiswahili in the electoral process hurt indigenous communities, especially those whose primary language is indigenous. This language barrier made it hard for these communities to access full electoral information. Many speakers of these communities couldn't fully grasp speeches, debates, and other campaign content because Kiswahili was the dominant language. This limited how they engaged in the election. As a matter of fact, they felt excluded and side-lined (Interview, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2024).

The statement underscores the negative impact of linguistic exclusion on indigenous communities during the electoral process, particularly when Kiswahili is the dominant language. The respondent highlighted that the exclusive use of Kiswahili created significant barriers to accessing comprehensive

electoral information, leaving those who primarily speak indigenous languages at a disadvantage. This limitation hindered their ability to fully understand important campaign content, including speeches and debates, thereby reducing their electoral engagement. As argued by [30], "When people accept to lose their language, they surrender themselves under the master's feet. Maintaining indigenous language is maintaining linguistic identity and a sense of freedom" (p. 18). This highlights the crucial role that indigenous languages play in preserving cultural identity and fostering a sense of autonomy and connection within communities.

It was also suggested that the use of indigenous languages ensured equal access to electoral information. In a focus group discussion with the electorate, one respondent stated, "Although the use of indigenous languages was sporadic, it ensured that we accessed crucial electoral information. It made us aware of key election issues, which in turn led to our burning desire to participate in the election." "The respondents acknowledged that, while the use of indigenous languages in the electoral process was sporadic, it played a significant role in ensuring access to crucial electoral information. They highlighted that even limited instances of using their languages heightened their awareness of key election issues, ultimately igniting a strong desire to participate in the electoral process. This statement underscores the importance of linguistic inclusivity, suggesting that even occasional incorporation of indigenous languages can empower communities and enhance their engagement in democratic activities. The respondents' experiences reflect the potential of indigenous languages to facilitate informed participation, reinforcing the need for more consistent use of these languages to better serve all voters. The view of these respondents raised a concern of integrating language policy to cater the linguistic needs and demands of indigenous users. According to [3], language policy should consider indigenous languages to shape the linguistic landscape of a society. This recognition can contribute to the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages.

It was reported that the use of indigenous languages by candidates significantly enhanced voters' sense of inclusion and engagement in the electoral process. Another respondent in the focus group discussion stated, "When candidates used our indigenous languages, we felt more included. This made a big difference in how we engaged with the process." "The respondents highlighted the crucial role of indigenous languages in fostering inclusivity during elections. They noted that when candidates communicated in their indigenous languages, they felt a greater sense of belonging and connection to the electoral process. They emphasized that the use of indigenous languages not only facilitated a better understanding of electoral information but also encouraged more active involvement, as it resonated with their cultural and linguistic identity. Their views second the idea of incorporating indigenous languages in election. This aligns with [32] argument, which warns against the prioritization of a single

dominant language in national affairs, as it can marginalize large segments of the population and hinder their engagement in essential national task such as democratic processes. Participants stressed the need for a balanced approach that recognizes the linguistic diversity of the electorate to ensure that all citizens are adequately informed and engaged. [3] reinforces this idea, asserting that the use of indigenous languages builds trust and positive relationships between electoral stakeholders. By incorporating indigenous languages, elections become more accessible to marginalized communities, promoting a more representative and inclusive democratic process.

The strategic use of indigenous languages by candidates was reported to have enhanced voter morale and fostered a stronger sense of connection, encouraging greater participation in the electoral process. When candidates used indigenous languages during their campaigns, it was seen as a sign of respect for the cultural and linguistic identity of indigenous communities. One of the electorates in focus group discussion expressed this sentiment "The use of indigenous languages by some candidates boosted our morale and confidence to engage in the electoral process". The respondent emphasized that accessing and understanding electoral information in a familiar language significantly enhanced their sense of value and ability to participate effectively. They conveyed that when such information was presented in their indigenous languages, it boosted their confidence to engage in the process, fostered a sense of inclusion, and communicated respect for their linguistic identity. According to them, this reinforced the notion that their votes and voices were meaningful and integral to the electoral process. The participants called for linguistic fairness, arguing that it was crucial for a democratic election, while opposing linguistic bias that favoured Kiswahili without considering the needs and desires of their communities. This aligns with [18] who suggests that indigenous speakers should have the right to access information in the language they understand best. He views these linguistic rights as fundamental human rights, spotlighting the hurdles confronting speakers of indigenous languages in accessing education, governmental services, and other societal essentials. This perspective aligns with the respondents' calls for linguistic fairness, emphasizing the importance of inclusive communication in promoting active and informed participation in democratic processes. Sequentially, [12] noted that "using indigenous languages, particularly in contexts like entrepreneurship and education, can reduce communication barriers because individuals think more effectively in their indigenous languages and that knowledge acquired in these languages becomes instinctual" (p. 4). [36] cautions that the prestige of a language or its status as a national language does not guarantee that it is understood to everyone. This underscores the need to seriously consider the linguistic identities and needs of different groups. Effective communication in elections must account for the diverse linguistic backgrounds of all voters to ensure that information is accessible and



meaningful to everyone.

The issue of culture and linguistic heritage was also presented as a key factor influencing voter engagement during the electoral process. Respondents emphasized that language is deeply tied to their cultural identity, and the use of indigenous languages helps preserve this heritage. One political analyst highlighted the importance of cultural and linguistic heritage in the electoral process, stating:

Language is more than just a tool for communication; it is a crucial element of our cultural identity. When indigenous languages are used during elections, it empowers communities by preserving their heritage, fostering a deeper connection between voters and the democratic process, and ensuring that political participation is truly inclusive (Interview on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2024).

The statement emphasizes the interplay between language and identity in democratic participation. It asserts that by recognizing and using indigenous languages in elections, political systems validate the cultural heritage of minority communities, which in turn reinforces their sense of belonging. This acknowledgment is said to create an environment where individuals feel that their voices matter, encouraging greater engagement in the electoral process. The statement also notes that when people see their linguistic identities respected, it enhances their trust in the system and promotes a more inclusive democracy. Ultimately, it argues that language transcends mere communication, becoming a powerful symbol of identity and respect that can significantly impact political involvement and civic engagement. [2] calls for linguistic inclusivity, advocating for language policies that recognize and accommodate the linguistic diversity of societies. He argues that such policies are essential for ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their linguistic background, have equal access to political, social, and educational opportunities. His perspective supports the idea that linguistic inclusivity is not just a matter of practical communication but is also critical for fostering social cohesion, political inclusion, and a truly representative democracy. This underscores the significance of linguistic inclusivity in cultivating a sense of belonging and empowerment among different linguistic communities. According to the respondents, such inclusivity not only promotes active engagement in elections but also reinforces their belief that their contributions to the political process are valued and respected.

It was also reported that true linguistic inclusivity requires the use of both Kiswahili and indigenous languages. Kiswahili, as the national language, has been vital in fostering unity and facilitating communication during elections. However, relying solely on it risks excluding significant portions of the population, particularly in rural areas where indigenous languages are more prevalent. As one political analyst noted:

For elections to be truly inclusive, we need both Kiswahili and indigenous languages to be used. Using Kiswahili alone leaves out many people, especially in rural areas. But when candidates speak using indigenous languages, it

builds trust and makes community members feel represented and respected (Interview on 21st August, 2024).

This underscores the importance of recognizing the emotional and cultural connections that indigenous languages foster between candidates and voters. When voters hear messages in their indigenous tongues, they feel acknowledged and valued, which deepens their trust in the political process. Linguistic inclusivity can only be achieved by combining Kiswahili with indigenous languages to ensure that all citizens regardless of their linguistic background can fully understand and engage in the democratic process. This approach not only broadens participation but also strengthens the legitimacy of the electoral process by fostering respect and trust between leaders and their communities. [32] indicates that when policymakers fail to recognize the existence and significance of indigenous languages, it leads to the neglect of the desires and demands of these language communities. These scholars contend that indigenous languages cannot be replaced, as they hold intrinsic cultural value and play a crucial role in effective communication and representation.

## 7. Conclusions

The study adds great value to sociolinguistic theory and its practice. The study pinpoints the convergence between language and society. This study clearly shows that when there is a societal-linguistic mismatch, it results in linguistic thirst and cries. The study reminds policymakers to consider the linguistic needs of so-called indigenous speakers. The findings reveal that the use of indigenous languages in elections is crucial for fostering inclusivity and ensuring equitable access to electoral information. Although Kiswahili played a vital role in unifying diverse linguistic groups, its dominance in the electoral process marginalized indigenous language speakers, particularly in rural areas where indigenous languages are prevalent. Respondents emphasized that the strategic use of indigenous languages improved comprehension, strengthened connections between candidates and voters, and encouraged greater voter participation.

The study recommends that there is a need for language planners and policymakers to rethink and reform language policies related to elections and formal communication. A balanced approach that incorporates both Kiswahili and indigenous languages would ensure broader engagement and prevent the marginalization of linguistic minorities. Electoral materials should be available in indigenous languages, and personnel at polling stations should be adequately trained to assist speakers of languages other than Kiswahili. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political candidates should prioritize linguistic inclusivity during campaigns and the election process. Using indigenous languages in political campaigns and electoral communication would improve comprehension, particularly in rural areas, and ensure that all citizens have access to critical election information. Future research can investigate the correlation be-

tween linguistic exclusivity and voter turnout in rural and urban areas. This would provide deeper insights into the practical benefits of using indigenous languages in elections and other formal domain.

## Abbreviations

URT United Republic of Tanzania

## Author Contributions

**Kasara Belias Ngoboka:** Data curation, Formal Analysis, Project administration, Resources, Writing - original draft

**Eustard Rutalemwa Tibategeza:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing - review & editing

**Nasibu Musa Kalokola:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing - review & editing

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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