

Sociolinguistics Variables That Influence Language Choice in Multilingual Churches

Ann Nyambura Kaberere, Jane Ombati, Alexander Meitamei

Languages, Linguistics and Culture, Maasai Mara University, Nairobi, Ngong, Kenya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800907>

Received: 26 August 2026; Accepted: 31 August 2026; Published: 20 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Churches in Kajiado North Sub-County draw members from diverse linguistic backgrounds making language choice a critical aspect. This study set out to examine sociolinguistics factors that influence language choice in multilingual churches in Kajiado North sub county. The study was guided by Markedness theory by Mryer Scotton (1998). The research employed a descriptive research design while 10% of the total population of churches (297) and total population of church officials (1478) as proposed by Kelinger (1973) was employed. Therefore, target population comprised of 30 churches and 148 church leaders. Simple random sampling was used to select 30 churches while systematic random sampling was used to select 148 church officials. An interview guide was used to collect data from church officials on sociolinguistics variables that determine language choice in churches. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and presented using tables and pie charts while qualitative data was analyzed thematically and presented through thematic description supported by representative participants responses. The study findings revealed that various sociolinguistics variables determined language choice which include age, social class, language ideologies, service structure and domain. The study therefore concludes that language choice in church contexts is dynamic, socially embedded process shaped by both structural norms and individual agency. This study provides insights into how language choice and practices within institutions influence participation, identity and inclusion. It further contributes to sociolinguistics scholarly by demonstrating how language choice functions as a source of constructing and negotiating social stratification in multilingual setting.

Keywords: Multilingualism”, Domain”, Social status”, Social Identity”, Language Choice.

INTRODUCTION

There are about eight billion people in the world and approximately 7,118 spoken languages which aid in the preservation of culture, as means of expression and as a vehicle for comprehension and learning (Despina, 2023). Most children in various parts of the world grow up with more than one language while the young people move to various locations for studies and work where they learn other languages making them bilingual or multilingual (Lid, 2018). Multilingualism is the utilization of more than two languages (simultaneously or separately) by an individual or community (Zhong, 2020). According to Hammerberg (2022) multilingualism is part and parcel of language and all humans are naturally multilingual. Multilingual can either be speakers of minority indigenous languages who have to learn a state language or migrants who learn the language of the country they have migrated to (Kirkpatrick, 2018).

Whenever multilingual come together, they have to decide which language to use. Though the Language choice is natural and automatic, it is not random, it is influenced by a community’s social organization and the social context of the discourse. According to Ansah (2016), language choice by any multilingual speaker depends mainly on the domain of usage and the speaker’s linguistic repertoire. Ruilin and Esli (2021) notes that dominance of a language influences the speaker’s preference since it has advantage in social expansion, speaker’s economic status and better

opportunities. Language dominance can be analyzed in terms of language use, how often the bilinguals use their language and how different these choices are across various domains. Various social variables influence language choice at both individual and at society level which include: gender, language proficiency, ethnicity, attitude and speakers' economic status.

Problem Statement

Language plays key role in shaping social interaction, identity and power structures among interlocutors. In multilingual setting, speakers must choose the language to use in different contexts for effective communication. Churches in Kenya are becoming increasingly multilingual as more people migrate to urban areas in search of employment. This has necessitated multilingual churches to employ various linguistic strategies to cater for all congregants. Previous studies on language use in religious setting have mainly explored on code switching and mixing, language attitude and language styles in multilingual churches. Though these studies have largely contributed to the understanding of language use in religious contexts, less focus has been given to factors that influence the choice of linguistic strategies employed in various churches. Understanding of linguistic strategies employed by various churches will shed light on social inclusion, cultural identity and the role of religion in promoting or discouraging social hierarchies. It is on this ground that the researcher sets out to investigate whether the various language choices and the linguistic strategies employed in multilingual churches in urban areas reflects or perpetuate social stratification.

Objective

The objective of this study is to examine sociolinguistics variables that influence language choice in multilingual churches in Kajiado North sub county, Kenya

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive research design which aims at analyzing human way of life (culture) and their behaviors. The study was conducted in Kajiado North Sub County, Kajiado County, one of the forty- seven counties in Kenya found in southern part of the country. Christian religion was purposively sampled since it is the religion that uses different languages to spread the gospel, other religions use a common language. According to Kerlinger (1973), as quoted by Orodho (2009), a 10% sample of the target population is sufficient so long as it provides the desired level of accuracy. The researcher sampled 30 churches, which is 10% of the target population of 297 churches and 148 church leaders, which is 10% of 1478 church leaders. To ensure equitable representation of all church categories in the final sample, denominations were proportionally apportioned by calculating the percentage of each denomination, yielding 3 Catholic churches, 9 Evangelical churches and 18 Pentecostal churches.

A semi-structured interview guides was used to collect data from church leaders. This enabled the researcher to prob and prompt the church leaders to give more information. The researcher created a context of conversational intimacy that encouraged the respondents to give a great deal of information. Snowball sampling technique, also known as net-working sampling technique, was used to select church leaders since it was difficult for the researcher to identify them. In the church context, identifying categories of men, women and youth is hard because the membership is informal and highly fluid. This framework has been highly recommended for studies involving socially networked or hard to get population (Ting et.al. 2025). The church leaders were also stratified depending on their gender (male and female). In terms of age, the respondents were classified into three age cohorts following previous sociolinguistics researchers (Obiero, 2008 and Tagliamonte, 2012). The age cohorts were as follows: Youths (18- 35), middle aged adults (36-55) and older adults (56 and above). This helped the researcher to examine whether pattern of language choice differ across different age cohorts. Data that was collected through tape recording was transcribed and coded. Further, sociolinguistics variable in language preference were

identified, analyzed and finally interpreted. Excerpt from the transcribed data was used to analyze each variable thematically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An individual or a society may decide to choose a particular language or be drawn to a particular language for communication depending on various factors.

Domain

According to Spolsky (2012), domain is a specific purpose, group of speakers or place assigned to a particular language or variety which includes work, religion, friendship and family just to mention but a few. Fishman (1972) introduced domain analysis, which he defines as the use of language in different institutional setting in multilingual community. He further notes that language in different domains can be used correctly when only one language or a variety is utilized at a time by a particular kind of interlocutors, topic and occasion. Language behavior is a reflection of social-cultural practices of a given community hence there is no invariant set of domains applicable to all multilingual setting. Researchers may conduct fieldwork, interviews, surveys or analyze recorded conversations to gather data on how language functions within different social contexts

A number of research have been carried out on domain and language choice. Jerico (2021) investigated signs posted within the compound of a major Catholic church, located in Philippines, in terms of types of language use. He analyzed over a hundred signs in the religious linguistic landscape, which he calls 'churchscape'. The finding show that English dominates in the churchscape as a language of communication and language of tourism while local languages such as Filipino and Pangasinan assume a secondary role in the churchscape. Greenfield investigated language use in multilingual Puerto Rican population of New York. He found out that, Spanish (low language) is used in casual settings like in friendship and family settings while English (high language) is preferred for official use, like in the work domain and in the education sector. In some domains, the interlocutors may have two or even more potential language choices. The determining factor on which language to use is whether they view the domain the same way and the topic of the conversation. People use both their mother tongue and other languages in casual domain while English was preferred for official domain and sometimes in casual domains like in friendship and neighborhood domains. The above studies were carried out in various educational, casual, official and family domains. On the other hand, in the current research, the researcher set out to investigate language choice in religious domain, particularly in the multilingual religious domain.

The literature review shows that domain significantly influences language choice in multilingual communities. However, previous research mainly concentrated on general multilingual environments or urban churches, with little focus on how specific communicative events within these churches affect language decisions in Kajiado North Sub-County. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring language choices during different communicative events in multilingual churches in the area.

Social Distance

Social distance in sociolinguistics is the degree of closeness or intimacy in social context. This significantly determine the choice of language with different speakers or groups. Interlocutors tend to use the same language with people who have a common interest or affiliations (in group) or adjust their language when communicating with those whom they have no common social characteristics (out group). Social distance as a factor that determine language choice in multilingual setting can be viewed in two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. In vertical dimension language choice is influenced by the position of someone in relation to others. For example, respect is accorded to someone above in terms of status and age. On the other hand, horizontal dimension is the closeness one has with others. Low code is commonly used to someone close in terms of religious background, level of education, gender and friendship (Sodah, 2019). The current study seeks to investigate how language

used in multilingual churches informs social stratification. This literature helped the researcher to determine whether the language used in churches is an indicator of in group or out group and vertical or horizontal.

According to Carol Myers-Scotton (1997), language choice is guided by speakers' assessment of social relationships and the rights and obligations associated with different interactions. Her Markedness Model suggests that speakers select the language they believe best matches the expected social relationship in a given context. Consequently, language choice reflects not only communicative needs but also social norms governing interactions among participants. Empirical studies have also demonstrated the influence of social distance on language choice. In multilingual religious settings, researchers have found that clergy often use widely understood languages, such as national or official languages, when addressing diverse congregations to reduce social distance and promote inclusivity. In contrast, local or ethnic languages are frequently used during interactions among members who share close social relationships or common cultural backgrounds, thereby reinforcing solidarity and a sense of belonging. The reviewed literature indicates that social distance plays a significant role in determining language choice across multilingual contexts. However, limited research has examined how social distance influences language choice during different communicative events in multilingual churches in Kajiado North Sub-County. The present study addresses this gap by investigating how the relationships among participants shape language choice in various church communicative events.

Linguistic Proficiency

According to Robio and Hacking (2019) language proficiency is an individual's ability to apply language rules and competency simultaneously in a particular context without rehearsing. On the other hand, Ocampo (2021) defines language proficiency as the speaker's ability to use language appropriately depending on the place, the time and the manner. A number of scholars have identified linguistic proficiency as one of the factors that determine language choice in multilingual setting in various domains. This study examined whether language proficiency of members in multilingual churches in urban areas is a variable that determine language choice. Although previous studies acknowledge the role of linguistic proficiency in shaping language choice, few have examined how differences in language proficiency among church leaders and congregants influence language choice during various communicative events in multilingual churches in Kajiado North Sub-County. The present study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the extent to which linguistic proficiency affects language choice in multilingual church settings.

Social Class

According to Milroy & Gordon (2003), depending on the language chosen by individuals or a group of people, one can easily categorize their social class or the religion they belong to. According to Sodah (2019), the decision of which language is termed as High variety or Low variety lies solely in the hands of those holding prestigious position in a given community. These are the elites in a community who decide language status and the role they play (dominant or weaker). For instant, speakers of a majority language are likely to hold important position in a society (politically) hence their language can gain the status of High variety unlike the minority language which attains Low variety. According to Sopian (2019), an individual's or group's social class is not only tagged to their wealth, power or education level but also to the language choice and also to the manner in which this language is utilized. Though from the same society, different groups may differ in language choice and use. This literature assisted the researcher to investigate whether the language policy strategies put in place in multilingual churches are tagged to members' social class.

Language Status

According to Ferrer and Sankoff (2004) language choice is influenced by dominant languages. This means that most multilingual may prefer a dominant language for communication since it is advantageous in terms of economic and social opportunities. Dominant language can be used in formal and informal setting which aids in

gaining prestige, power and authority (Pillai 2006). Language is considered superior if it is spoken by the majority in a given society, according to its social function. Holmes (2008) explains that choice of dominant language creates social distance among speakers while less dominant language establishes solidarity in interactions. Dominant language, when chosen, provides the user with prestige, increase the chance of expanding social network and gaining economic success. The choice of a given language forms a social group which leads to development of sense of identity (Managan, 2004). This study evaluated whether the status of English and Kiswahili languages in Kenya is a determining factor in their use in multilingual churches in urban areas.

Level Of Education

Education in multilingual nation nurtures national cohesion and maintain multilingualism. It is also considered as the cornerstone for achieving individuals' full potential and achieving equitable society for national development (Sharma, 2021). Level of education significantly influence language choice and use in various contexts. According to Rassool (2004), local languages were marginalized and reduced to the level of minority languages by the introduction of colonial languages. This marginalization led to cultural erosion and social distance among people who were once a cohesive group. In many nations of the world, language policy is key since it's the mean through which power is exerted and highly influence social position in a given society. Bourdieu (1999) notes that linguistic choices and habits were highly influenced by colonial languages and language policy since these languages are associated to power and prestige. In most international businesses, academic setting and in Scientific research, colonial languages are commonly used Kenya being one of them. The observations made above assisted the researcher to investigate

Age

Age of a speaker is a key factor in conducting social interaction study since it affects the choice of language. According to Janes (2006) the relationship between language and age has been analyzed traditionally from two different point of view: Language dynamic during one's life (age specific) and the language of different social groups living in the same speech community (generation specific). Eckert (1997) notes that "Age and aging are experienced both individually and as part of cohort of people who share a life stage and /or an experience of history."

Gal (1979) conducted research on language choice among Hungarian society in Australia. He observed that two codes were used in different contexts: German was used by young people when communicating to their peer while Hungarian when talking to older members of the community. The above study will assist the researcher to explore age as a factor that may determine language choice in multilingual churches. Li (1994) carried a study in Tyneside community in China which revealed that age is one of the factors that determined language choice and change. In terms of multilingualism, younger people easily acquire multiple languages simultaneously compared to their older counterparts. Age being one of the main factor that determine language choice in multilingual setting, the above literature laid foundation upon which the researcher will examine age as a variable that influence language choice in multilingual churches.

Theoretical Framework

Markedness Theory, particularly Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, views language choice as a socially motivated practice. It is based on two major principles: the distinction between unmarked and marked choices and the Negotiation Principle along with the Markedness Metric. An unmarked choice aligns with the anticipated social relations and norms of an interaction, while a marked choice signals an alternative social meaning or social relationship relative to these expectations. The theory thus posits that the selection of linguistic codes responds to the rights, obligations, and identities associated with specific interactions. Social meanings (including authority, solidarity, identity, inclusion, and social distance) may then be signified by language choice. This study aims to understand how language choice in multilingual churches is affected by sociolinguistic variables by employing

Markedness Theory. An analysis of factors such as age, gender, education, proficiency, social status, ethnicity, ideology, and other variables is considered in relation to linguistic expectations that function in a variety of church contexts. The analysis is guided by the theory, which is used to identify marked and unmarked choices and to examine deviations from the unmarked as marked choices, while paying attention to the social meanings that the choices negotiate. It thus offers an interpretative model of language choice not only as a function of personal choice but as a means by which church members develop and interact in social discourse and social identities.

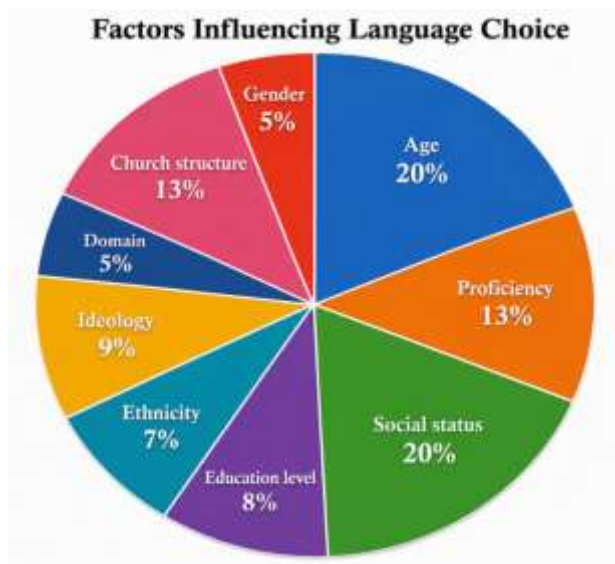
The theory will be used to analyze data gathered from church leaders to determine social variables that influence language use and choice in multilingual churches. The reasons for the use of English or Kiswahili/ local languages in the special activities in the church will be explored with the leaders to ascertain the use of expected (unmarked) or alternative (marked) patterns of language use in the activities. Special focus will be on the relationship of leaders to language with social factors like age, gender, education, language level, social status, ethnicity, ideology, domain, church structure. The theory will then allow the study to go beyond the description of which languages are chosen and why certain languages are preferred, and what social meanings leaders give to such choices.

Data Presentation

To establish factors that determined language policies in the sampled churches, the interview responses were analyzed thematically with the aim of uncovering considerations and influences behind language policies made by the church leaders. This was done by first coding the transcripts to identify phrases and statements where the leaders explained why certain languages were chosen.

These were then grouped into broader themes that reflected broader patterns. For instance, responses that cited the need to accommodate different age groups or educational levels were organized under theme proficiency. Statements referring to maintaining formality, prestige or church image were coded under language status and ideology while statements referring to inclusivity or reaching the less educated were coded under accessibility and social inclusion. Through this thematic organization, the study identified a set of sociolinguistics factors, including age, gender, education, ethnicity and social class that leaders consciously or unconsciously considered in forming or justifying their church's language policy. These factors were later supported with excerpts from the respondents. Pie chart 4.6 below shows sociolinguistics factors that influence language policy in churches

Pie chart 4.1: Sociolinguistics Factors that Influence Language Policy in Churches



Source:2026 Data

From the pie chart 4.6 above, age (20%) is cited as the highest factor that influences language choice in multilingual churches. This can be explained by the fact that older people prefer local languages for accessibility and to affirm their identity. On the other hand, the younger generation prefers Kiswahili or English, probably because of education and socialization in an urban context. According to Fishman (1972), age differences create differences in language preference, which religious domain should navigate when choosing language to use during worship.

Proficiency (13%) is a key factor, as congregants tend to opt for and engage more actively in services conducted in languages they understand well. Therefore, language choice aligns with communicative competence and the necessity for full participation in religious rituals (Gumperz, 1982). Social status (20%) and education level (8%) also influence language preference by creating symbolic links between language and prestige. For example, English is often regarded as the language of upward mobility and higher education, leading higher-status or more educated congregants to favor it during worship (Blommaert, 2006). Conversely, Kiswahili or local languages may be preferred in communities emphasizing inclusivity and solidarity. Although less prominent, ethnicity (7%) and language ideology (9%) still significantly affect language choice. Ethnicity influences attachment to mother tongues and identity expression in worship settings (Spolsky, 2009) while language ideology reflects beliefs about which languages are more “spiritual,” “formal,” or “appropriate” for religious rituals (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Gender (5%) appears to be the least influential factor, implying that male and female congregants do not differ markedly in language preference during worship. Nonetheless, gender could also interact indirectly with other elements such as education or social roles within the church.

DISCUSSION

AGE

According to the data presented in table 4.6, age (20%) is key sociolinguistics variable that determines language choice in multilingual domain, churches included. People of the different age or age groups may prefer to use different languages depending on their level of education, linguistic proficiency and the linguistic experiences they have had in their lives. Age is one of the most salient predictors of language choice. Younger congregants often prefer lingua franca such as English or Kiswahili due to their association with modernity and education, whereas older members tend to favor mother tongues for accessibility and identity (Fishman, 1972). This reflects Fishman’s (1972) domain analysis, where age stratification influences communicative norms in religious contexts.

According to Queen and Chesire (2013), age and language preference analysis can be approached in two main perspectives. The first one is where language variation is based on generational experiences, where there is a tendency to preserve their linguistic experiences as they grow older (Labov, 1994). According to Fishman (1977), going by this perspective, we expect three main generational roles (children, parents and grandparents). The second perspective is where people within the same speech community but in different social groups have variation in language choice. Table 4:5 show language preference based on age across all denomination.

Table 4:5: Age and Language Preference.

Age Group	English Only	Kiswahili Only	Translation	Separate Services
18-30	55%	20%	35%	20%
31-50	30%	35%	40%	58%
51+	15%	45%	25%	22%

Source: Data 2025

The results suggest that age is linked to language preferences of the church leaders and congregation. The youngest age group (18-30) had the highest preference for English-only services, with 55% preferring English only, 20% Kiswahili only and 35% preferring translation. Within the group of 31-50 years old, there was a more balanced distribution with 30% preferring English-only services, 35% Kiswahili-only services and 40% translation. This group also expressed a relatively high preference for separate services at different times: 58%. 45% of the older than 51 respondents said they would want Kiswahili only services, while 15% said they would want English only services. These patterns raise the question of whether there is a difference between the generations with regard to the appropriateness and usefulness of languages in worship. Older participants seem to have a stronger attachment to Kiswahili while younger people seem to have a stronger attachment to English.

Young participants might have a preference for English because they are more exposed to it, particularly in formal education, employment, media and other up-to-date social contexts. For this group, English can thus have connotations of modernity, learning and social mobility. However, the fact that some younger respondents preferred translation suggests that contemporary linguistic orientations do not necessarily dispense with the need for inclusivity. The 31-50 age group seems to fall somewhere in between, while enjoying English, Kiswahili, translation and separate services. This could be because of their experience of the traditional and modern use of language. The higher preference of Kiswahili among the people aged 51 and above could be attributed to familiarity with Kiswahili and their ability to use it throughout their social and religious experiences.

These differences illustrate that for Myers-Scotton (1993) the social connotations of a language choice are different depending on the expectations of certain groups and contexts. For younger worshipers English could be the unmarked language option for them if it matches with what they have learned and experienced in school and their work lives, while Kiswahili might be the unmarked language for older congregants whose language repertoires are more closely tied to Kiswahili. Alternative paths for churches to negotiate these different expectations include translation and separate services. However, age does not always affect language choice by itself, but rather together with education, ability and social experience, which determines the language choice members consider to be appropriate to use in worship.

Social Status

From the pie chart 1.1 above, 20% of the respondents said social status was a factor affecting language choice. The data from interviews suggest that the participants connected language preferences to their profession, level of education, professional identity and perceived socioeconomic status. English was seen as more closely associated with modernity, professionalism and higher social status whilst Kiswahili and translation were seen as more accessible to different socioeconomic groups. “*English-speaking church is modern in a way,*” explains a church leader who is a banker, referencing the environment and lifestyle the respondent would be familiar with, and the relationship between service language, environment and lifestyle. Likewise, a businessman commented that he saw an English-speaking church that had people who “*handle spiritual issues professionally*” and said, “*I can easily identify with them.*” The above responses illustrate that the use of English was not just an expression of communication, but of social identity and social belonging as well.

Changes in church language use were also a reflection of the language and social status relationship. One elder said that the church actually started in Kiswahili but then a higher status came into the church as leaders and suggested a change to English. In the same way, one pastor commented on the use of two different services for English and Kiswahili and noted that there were some visible differences among those attending the two services. “*A Kiswahili service in one branch was eventually cancelled due to poor attendance,*” another leader reported. The accounts indicate the possibilities for social stratification of language preferences and how this may then affect attendance and involvement in the Church.

The conclusions are in line with Bourdieu's (1991) idea of linguistic capital, which states that specific linguistic devices may become more valued in certain social arenas. As in this context, English is seen to have more symbolic significance when participants relate it to professional and socio-economic development. The data also reveal, however, that churches try to accommodate these differences by providing translation and separate service. From a Markedness point of view, the unmarked language is a language that is congruent with the social expectations of a certain group and the choice can get marked social meaning. In this way, English can be used as an unmarked option in a socially professional congregation, but translation and/or Kiswahili might be more suitable if more accessibility and involvement is sought. Importantly, even when churches are offering various language options to help include people, there is a potential for social differentiation to occur without intent.

Proficiency

Language competence was cited by 13% as a factor that affects language choice. The interviews show that churches take into account members' understanding and usage of a language in deciding on a language of worship. A pastor from an English-speaking church reported that church members, including children, were comfortable and fluent in English, but not as strong in Kiswahili. Here too it was suggested that the presence of non-Kenyan congregants was a reason for using English. In this instance, English was chosen because it matched the linguistic ability of many of the members of the congregation.

In a church which was serviced in Kiswahili, another pattern emerged. According to an elder, Kiswahili was chosen because it could be easily understood by people of various ages and levels of education. In this instance the selection was basically practical, the church wanted to have a language they could understand by the greatest number of members. Another answer to differences in skill was translation. One pastor explained that some members were comfortable with English while others preferred Kiswahili, and that some pastors were unable to preach effectively in Kiswahili as they are effective preachers in English. Translation thus enabled the church to keep a group of speakers with various linguistic repertoires and make sure that members of the congregation could follow the message.

This was also observed in churches that held separate services. An elder explained that some members were comfortable with English, others preferred Kiswahili and separate services ensured that all members get the message. The results in turn demonstrate that competencies can have a direct effect on language of use, by allowing for the use of a language that is understood by the majority of users as well as indirect effects, such as the use of translation and the provision of separate services.

The findings corroborate Fishman's (1972) conclusion that language choice is related to communicative needs of specific social settings. They also illustrate an important feature of the Markedness Model: that the choices made in the language are judged on the basis of the participants and expectations of interaction. If English is commonly spoken, it can be unmarked, reflecting the linguistic ability of the congregation. When there is a divided proficiency in English and Kiswahili, translation is negotiated in response to competing expectations of language. Proficiency is thus a facilitative and limiting element in multilingual worship.

Language Ideology

Church leaders identified language ideology (9%) as a factor influencing language choice. The proportion is smaller than some of the other variables, but the interview data show that beliefs of the value and social function of languages affect church language use. Language ideology is the socially constructed beliefs about the value, appropriateness and meaning ascribed to certain languages or varieties (Woolard, 1998; Kroskrity, 2004). English was often linked to education, professionalism, modernity and prestige while Kiswahili was linked to accessibility, national unity and inclusiveness in the study context. Cultural identity and emotional and spiritual ties were also linked with indigenous languages.

“Those who are very educated, are in favour of speaking English and particularly if they are in a high-ranking profession,” said a youth leader from an English-speaking church. The respondent went on to make an additional connection between the use of English and the educational and professional attributes of the congregation. This shows that the choice of language can be an indicator of ideology about the sort of person who speaks a language. The preference for English is thus not solely due to proficiency capabilities, but also to the sense that is conveyed in the larger context of the Kenyan society.

This was also reflected in those churches that openly opted for Kiswahili. A pastor said Kiswahili was adopted because it could “reach everyone” and educated and less educated members could feel at home in Kiswahili. In this case, Kiswahili was a language of inclusion and national unity and was almost entirely constructed ideologically. The choice, therefore, put in question the idea that a high-class language can be the language of institutional communication.

The data also reveal that ideologies of language can be expressed in institutional arrangements. One Elder said that the church use English and some of the branches outside the town centre use Kiswahili. While members were free to attend any of the branches, differences in the languages represented within the branches meant that there were different linguistic environments. This illustrates the ideological operations that linguistic differences are linked to social distinctions, as described by Irvine and Gal (2000). English and Kiswahili were not only alternative communicative codes, but also gained meanings concerning education, urbanity, prestige, accessibility and belonging when it comes to the present study.

The Markedness Model of Myers-Scotton highlights the meanings ideologies carry with linguistic choices and explains the above-mentioned meanings. When English is anticipated in a professional and educated congregation, its use might be unmarked; when Kiswahili is chosen to show inclusiveness across educational and ethnic groups, this use may be also considered as an expected one. The findings thus reveal that language ideology shapes what the members of the church consider to be the appropriate language of worship and helps to shape the social meanings of language options.

Domain

The respondents (5%) came up with the domain of language use as a factor that affects language choice. There is still some variation within church worship in the interview data. There are opportunities for multilingual practices in prayers, songs and testimonies, whereas sermons and announcements tend to be more consistent with the church's prescribed language. The distribution reveals that a choice of language is dependent on the communicative goal and social norms for specific activities.

During songs and prayers, as well as during other activities, a church elder explained that there were more languages spoken, other than the prescribed language of the church. A praise and worship leader also indicated that he felt a greater sense of being “at home” when leading songs in Kiswahili or indigenous languages and that these songs created a sense of being spiritually connected. The following responses illustrate that the expressive and participatory character of worship activities allows choices of language that can vary from formal language. This difference was clearly pointed out by a pastor of a Kiswahili church who explained that Kiswahili would be used for the preaching and announcements, but other languages would be used during individual prayers, songs and testimonies. The difference is due to communicative situations expected for these activities. Formal activities have uniformity and institutional control, while expressive activities allow for more individual participation and linguistic flexibility.

The domain theory can be seen as a suitable framework for understanding such patterns as it can account for language choice in terms of the setting, participants, topic and social activity. The church can then be regarded as a larger Religious domain consisting of several subdomains related to activities. The church can thus be seen as accommodating a wide range of religious domains, each with a number of subdomains related to particular

activities. Otherwise, Hymes (1974) Ethnography of Communication also highlights the need to be able to make the right choice about the language used in specific communicative contexts. The results from Kajiado North corroborate these views because they show that there is no uniformity of language use in worship but depends on the activity that is being carried out.

In the context of the Markedness Model, the language used in formal activities (including the schoolwork) is considered the expected language, and the use of another language in songs, prayers or testimonies could be a marked choice, if the language choice has additional meaning (e.g., emotional intensity, solidarity, or cultural identity). Thus, Domain sets up expectations for how language will be used and affords opportunities for speakers to negotiate these expectations as they are involved in an activity with a purpose and participants.

Ethnicity

Among respondents, 7% reported that ethnicity affects language choice. Ethnic identity is less often reported than other factors, such as age and social status, but it appears relevant in the interview data, especially in worship practices such as prayers, songs, testimonies and other expressive elements of worship. Kiswahili or English may be used in multilingual churches, where members from different ethnic groups share a common language. Still, indigenous languages may be used when they are a desirable means of maintaining cultural identity or of creating a closer bond between certain members. One elder described a situation in which prayers and testimonies were sometimes translated into Kikuyu or Maasai when he wished to “make it closer” for some members. The elder also commented that the music chosen was based on “who is in the service.” This is reflected in practices in which ethnic languages are used in worship, both affectively and in terms of identity. At those junctures, the use of an indigenous language may provide a feeling of familiarity and solidarity (the dominant church language does not necessarily provide that). A woman leader also indicated that Kikuyu was sometimes employed because many members were Kikuyu but it couldn't be used during the service as other ethnic groups were also represented. This illustrates the necessity of keeping the balance between ethnic identification and greater congregational inclusion. Yet another pastor described how, at times, words from the congregants' home language were used, and that in some songs indigenous languages were used in an attempt to “connect us with our roots.” This is important because not all ethnic languages are used as the primary language of worship, but they are carefully used if they have special cultural or emotional significance. The results corroborate Fishman's (1989) perspective that language is a significant symbol of ethnic identity and cultural continuity. They also show how the language aspects of Giles and Johnson's (1987) view on ethnolinguistic identity can be seen in the use of language to establish affiliation with a social group. The use of an indigenous language in a service that otherwise contains mainly Kiswahili or English may be read as a marked choice from the Markedness Model, to establish a feeling of solidarity, intimacy, or ethnic identity. Ethnicity also impacts language choice beyond the language of the majority group, and in terms of the symbolic meaning of specific language resources.

Education Level

Table 4.5 shows that 8% of the respondents mentioned education level as a factor affecting language choice in the church worship. The qualitative data indicates that education is especially related to preferences for English which is viewed as prestigious, professional status and level of education. An elder from an English-speaking church explained, *“People who are highly educated prefer to speak English and especially if they are in prestigious professions. Our church doors are open for everyone who wishes to fellowship here but by the fact that we use English to conduct our service automatically attracts congregants with a given level of education.”* This suggests that although it might be unimportant to churches to exclude members based on education, their language practices may attract members with specific language skills and social backgrounds. The discovery echoes Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital, which is the idea that specific languages are endowed with symbolic meaning because of their association with the educational system and social mobility and social prestige. English can thus be used as a symbol of educational and socioeconomic identity, especially in situations that are closely identified with formal education and professional areas. Further understanding of this comes from Myers-

Scotton's Markedness Model which proposes that language selection is linked to rights and obligations in specific social interactions. In the English-speaking church English seems to be the unmarked option in a church where it is linked to education, professionalism and status. But the data also show that being educated does not predict a uniform preference for language, with some very well-educated congregants still opting for other languages.

In contrast, the Kiswahili-speaking churches and translation church stressed inclusion and accessibility over education status in the selection of language. Pastor from Kiswahili speaking church said, *"Kiswahili is a national language, and almost everyone speaks it fluently, and churches are meant to attract all people regardless of their level of education."* An Elder from a translating church commented that *"the level of education didn't matter as long as it is an open church."* These responses place Kiswahili and multilingualism as tools that enable crossing educational and ethnic boundaries, reflecting the status of Kiswahili as a lingua franca in Kenya (Irungu, 2020). During the same period, one ministry leader from a church providing separate language services recognized that highly educated members had a general preference for the English language, while less educated members had a general preference for the Kiswahili language, but some older members in the congregation and highly educated had a preference for Kiswahili. This exception indicates that in addition to education there are other factors (age, cultural affiliation, language experience, and language preference) that explain language preference. While English has been seen as a language of education and socioeconomic development, it is important to note that a person's educational or socioeconomic status does not necessarily infer English proficiency or preference (Kimani, 2019; Piper et al., 2016). The results show that education can have an effect on language choice because of its relationship to linguistic prestige and linguistic proficiency and social identity, while at the same time churches are negotiating these associations by means of practices including Kiswahili use and translation for the purpose of increasing participation and inclusion.

Gender

Table 4.5 shows that 5% of the respondents said that gender is one of the factors that affects the choice of language in church worship. While it can be argued that the proportion of qualitative responses is small, the qualitative responses indicate that there may be an intersection between gender and language choice in terms of differences of social roles, participation and communicative expectations in the church. The data suggest that biological sex is not necessarily the criteria that sets language preferences but that they can be influenced by the roles of men and women in religious and social interactions. Woman may participate more in some ministries and activities in which they interact with a variety of people in the church, which could lead to a preference for languages that are more open to communication, with men in leadership positions preferring more languages related to authority and formality. Patterns such as these illustrate that gender may interact with other sociolinguistics factors such as age, education, status, as well as church leadership factors. In the context of Communication Accommodation Theory, the speaker can modify the language used based on the social identities and expectations of specific communicative situations. So, gender may have an effect on language choice because the communicative expectations people have of men and women in the church are what they accommodate to, and not their personal preference for one language over another.

The qualitative evidence further illustrates that the concept of gender needs to be considered as an intersecting and not an independent factor of language choice. Male and female leaders can use English to assert their authority and competence in formal leadership roles and educated professional identities, while Kiswahili or indigenous languages might be used where interpersonal interaction, familiarity and inclusiveness are emphasized. The observation is in line with sociolinguistic theories which consider language as a tool used to negotiate social identity and social relations instead of being a tool for simple communication. The proportion of respondents that saw gender as a determinant also indicated a relatively small proportion of influence, which means that other factors might be more significant in the choice of language of the churches studied. The results do not lend themselves to an easy dichotomy of language preference as male versus female; rather, they suggest that gender is a factor that is interdependent with institutional roles, sociolinguistic expectations, and other sociolinguistic variables in determining their patterns of language use. The importance of gender in the building and negotiation

of identities in church discourse, however, seems to be context dependent and mediated by the social roles of the congregation members.

Church Structure

The structure of the church was given as a factor influencing language choice by 13% of the respondents. The results suggest that the organization of worship, such as the extent to which the service is prescribed in a liturgical sequence, has an impact on the level of linguistic flexibility that church leaders and members can use. There were fewer differences for churches with more structured worship services whilst churches with more flexible worship services allowed greater use of English, Kiswahili and indigenous languages.

This was especially true in the Catholic and Pentecostal churches. The Mass, said a Catholic priest, has a familiar order and the essential elements of the Mass are used in the language used for this particular Mass. The core of the Mass is fairly consistent, although sometimes local tongues are incorporated into the hymns or prayers. The priest connected this uniformity with continuity, order and the sacred nature of the liturgy. The results indicate that the institutional structure sets the expectations that limit spontaneous language switching.

In the Pentecostal service a different pattern developed. An elder elaborated that the church is not always conducted in the same order and services could be conducted differently depending on the theme, the preacher and what the congregation is looking for. This flexibility enables leaders to switch languages when they feel there is a need to improve understanding and participation, between English, Kiswahili and local language. The structure of the service, therefore, offers more room for the leaders to make real-time linguistic adjustments.

This contrast illustrates that language use is to some extent institutional in nature. Spolsky (2009) wants to emphasize that policies, beliefs and management decisions affect language practices in institutions, so this is relevant for the present analysis of language management. The role of language in highly structured churches could be subject to institutional protocols, while in less structured churches there would be more flexibility for individual leaders and congregants to negotiate what language should be used.

The Markedness Model also helps to understand how these differences in structure impact on expectations around language choice. When a ritual context is fixed, the language used in the ritual is likely to be the unmarked choice, inasmuch as it meets the institutional expectations. However, in a more flexible Pentecostal context, a change in language could be a part of the worship service itself and thus not be considered a distinct selection. A change of language gains social significance when it is employed to serve a specific purpose, for example inclusion, emphasis, solidarity or emotional connection. Church structure, therefore, influences the norms about language use within which speakers engage in the negotiations of their language choice.

CONCLUSION

The interview findings suggest that there is no single determinant of language choice in multilingual churches in Kajiado North, but rather that it is a product of social, linguistic and institutional factors. Each of these factors, including age, social status, proficiency, language ideology, ethnicity, domain, and church structure, plays a role in the choices and interpretation of the language(s) used, though with varying degrees of influence depending on the church and the communicative situation.

There are generational differences in language preference, with older participants showing a stronger preference for Kiswahili and younger participants a stronger preference for English. The association of English with professional identity, modernity, and prestige, as opposed to Kiswahili and translation, indicates social status. Proficiency is related to members' capacity to participate in the worship process, prompting churches to use English or Kiswahili, as well as translation or separate services, based on the congregation's linguistic repertoires. The meanings of these choices are symbolically attached to them through language ideology, in the form of

prestige, modernity, national unity, cultural identity, and the inclusion of particular languages. Songs, prayers, testimonies, and cases of code-switching are particularly rich in ethnic expression, as indigenous languages are employed to assert cultural identity and solidarity. For expressive activities, language can be more flexible, whereas for formal activities it is more likely to align with institutional language policies. The flexibility is further limited by church structure: highly structured liturgical traditions limit spontaneous variation, while less structured traditions allow for more linguistic negotiation.

Together, the results confirm Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, which holds that language choices gain social significance in contexts shaped by expectations about the participants, the activities they are engaged in and the institutional setting. A language is not inherently marked or unmarked; rather, its status is a function of the social relations and expectations in a specific interaction. It is concluded, then, that the choice of language in the churches examined is both a communicative activity and an instrument through which members engage in identity-building, belonging, social interaction and participation. Importantly, the data also show that efforts to address linguistic diversity, such as translation and separate services, not only reduce linguistic exclusion but can also result in new forms of social differentiation.

REFERENCES

1. Blommaert, J.(2006). Language Policy and National Identity, In T. Ricento (Ed.)
2. Language Policy: Theory and Method. Oxford.
3. Cheshire, J. (2013). Sociolinguistics. In J. K. Chambers & N. Schilling (Eds.), *The handbook of language variation and change* (2nd ed., pp. 3–20). Wiley-Blackwell.
4. Despina. (2023) Linguistic Diversity: Top Most Spoken Languages of the World. CEO World Magazine.<https://ceo world biz.com>
5. Eckert, P. (1997). Age as a sociolinguistic variable. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *The handbook of sociolinguistics* (pp. 151–167). Blackwell Publishers.
6. Ferguson, C. A. (1982). Religious factors in language spread. In R. L. Cooper (Ed.), *Language spread: Studies in diffusion and social change* (pp. 95–106). Indiana University Press.
7. Ferrer, C., & Sankoff, D. (2004). *The study of language variation and change*.
8. Fishman, J. A. (1972). *Sociolinguistics. A Brief Introduction*. Newbury House. Rowley
9. Gal, S. (2000). Language ideologies compared: Metaphors of public/private. In P. V. Kroskrity (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities* (pp. 35–84). School of American Research Press.
10. Giles, H., & Johnson, P. (1987). Ethnolinguistics identity theory: A social psychological approach to language maintenance. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 1987(68), 69–99. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.1987.68.69>
11. Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge University Press.
12. Hammarberg B. (2022) *Processes in Third Language Acquisition*. Edinbrough: Edinbrough University Press.
13. Hymes, D. (1974). Introduction: Toward ethnographies of communication. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *The ethnography of communication*. *American Anthropologist*, 66(6, Part 2), 1–34.
14. Irungu, P. K. (2020). Language preferences and attitudes towards local languages: A case of Makongeni Estate in Thika Town (Master's thesis, University of Nairobi). University of Nairobi eRepository. <https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/154493>
15. Irvine, J. T., & Gal, S. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In P. V. Kroskrity (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities* (pp. 35–84). School of American Research Press.
16. Janes, J. (2006). *Las Attitudes Towards Languages and Language Learning*. Magazine Inter-university Teacher Training Course. Zaragoza, Spain.
17. Jerico, J. (2021). *Exploring Religious Linguistic Landscape in philippines* Masarykova University.
18. Kerlinger, F. N. (1973). *Foundations of behavioral research* (2nd ed.). Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

20. Kimani, M. (2019). Language use and code-switching in multilingual classroom contexts in Kenya. *International Journal of Education and Research*.
21. Lid, K. (2018). *The Impact of Multilingualism on Global Education and Language Learning*. Cambridge University. United Kingdom.
22. Li, W. (1994). Three generations, two languages, one family: Language choice and language shift in a Chinese community in Britain. *Multilingual Matters*.
23. Managan, K. (2004). Diglossia reconsidered: Language choice and code-switching in Guadeloupean voluntary organizations. *Texas Linguistic Forum*, 47, 251–261.
24. Milroy, L., & Gordon, M.(2003) *Sociolinguistics: Methods and Interpretation*. Backwell Publishers .London
25. Obiero, O. J. (2008). From assessing language endangerment or vitality to creating and evaluating language revitalization programmes. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 17(4), 247–268.
26. Ocampo, D. (2021) *Functional Literacy of Alternative Learning System.Basis for Sustainable Extension Activity Development*.
27. Orodho, A. (2009) *Elements of Education and Social Science Research Methods*. Kenyatta University, Kenya
28. Piper, A., Shirley, M., & Wanjala, S. (2016). *Kenya's languages in education and development*. Oxford University Press.
29. Rassool, N. (2004).Global issues in language, education and development: Perspectives from postcolonial countries. *Multilingual Matters*.
30. Robio,F.& Hacking, J.(2019).Proficiency versus Performance. Springer, Cham. Roman,V.(2017).The Structure of Sociological Theory. Rautledge, New York.
31. Sharma, J. K. (2021). National education policy 2020: Language perspective. *International Journal of Management Research and Social Science*, 8(1), 10–13.
32. Sodah , N. (2019) *The Impact of Social Status on Language Shift: A case on Family Domain Language in Lember*. English Department of Post Graduate Programmed, Mataram University, Indonesia
33. Sopian, S.(2019). *Power of Social Class and its Impact to Language use*. Mataram University, Indonesia.
34. polsky, B. (2002). *Sociolinguistics*. Oxford University Press.
35. Spolsky, B. (2009). *Language management*. Cambridge University Press.
36. Spolsky B. (2012) *Family Language Policy-the Critical Domain*. *Journal of Multilingual and Multilingual Development*.
37. Tagliamonte, S. A. (2012). *Variationist sociolinguistics: Change, observation, interpretation*. Wiley-Blackwell.
38. Ting, H., Fam, K. S., & Lim, H. E. (2025). Snowball sampling: A review and guidelines for survey research. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 15(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.14707/ajbr.2501>
39. Woolard, K. A. (1998). Language ideology as a field of inquiry. In B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard, & P. V. Kroskrity (Eds.), *Language ideologies: Practice and theory* . Oxford University Press.
40. Woolard, K. A., & Schieffelin, B. B. (1994). Language ideology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, 55–82. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.23.100194.000415>
41. Zhong, I. & Lei L (2020) *The Research Trend of Multilingualism in Applied Linguistics and Education*. Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China.