

Linguistic Pathways to Equity: Exploring Pragmatics, Culture, and Social Justice among the Agiryama

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between language, culture, and social justice among the Agiryama community of Kenya, with particular emphasis on how pragmatic features of the Kigiryama language encode cultural values and mediate issues of equity. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and discourse data from everyday conversations, rituals, proverbs, and media use, the study demonstrates that Kigiryama pragmatics functions as a key cultural resource for social cohesion, advocacy, and identity construction. The analysis is grounded in Speech Act Theory and supported by insights from politeness theory and linguistic anthropology. Findings reveal that pragmatic strategies such as indirectness, metaphor, euphemism, proverbs, plural self-reference, and code-switching reflect deeply embedded values of respect, communal solidarity, hierarchy, and harmony. At the same time, the study shows how these linguistic resources are mobilized to address social justice concerns, including land rights, education, political representation, and access to legal and economic opportunities. However, linguistic marginalization, language shift, and restrictive language policies continue to limit the effectiveness of Kigiryama in formal domains. The paper argues that strengthening indigenous language use is essential not only for cultural preservation but also for advancing social justice and equitable participation among marginalized communities.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Agiryama, Kigiryama, Mijikenda, culture, social justice, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

The Agiryama, one of the nine sub-groups of the Mijikenda community of coastal Kenya, possess a rich linguistic and cultural heritage rooted in oral traditions, communal governance, and strong attachment to ancestral land. Predominantly found in Kilifi County, the community has historically relied on language as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values, regulating social relations, and resolving conflicts. However, like many indigenous communities, the Agiryama continue to face social justice challenges related to land dispossession, limited access to education, political marginalization, and linguistic exclusion in formal institutions.

This paper explores how the pragmatic use of Kigiryama functions both as a reflection of cultural norms and as a tool for negotiating equity and social justice. It argues that understanding indigenous pragmatics is crucial for designing culturally responsive policies and advocacy initiatives that resonate with community values and lived realities.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Agiryama Community

The Agiryama are among the largest Mijikenda sub-groups, with a population estimated at about 700,000. Their social organization is anchored in the kaya system, sacred forests that function as spiritual, cultural, and political centers. These sites symbolize identity, land ownership, and continuity of tradition, making language central to claims of heritage and legitimacy.

The Kigiryama Language

Kigiryama is a Bantu language characterized by a rich noun class system, tonal distinctions, and extensive use of figurative language. Pragmatically, it encodes respect, age hierarchy, gender roles, and communal responsibility. Distinct registers are used when addressing elders, peers, leaders, or when discussing sensitive matters such as death, sexuality, witchcraft, and conflict.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics, defined as the study of language in use and meaning in context, provides a critical foundation for understanding how utterances function as social action rather than merely as grammatical structures. Foundational scholars such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) argue that speaking is a form of doing, introducing the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Their work established that utterances perform functions such as requesting, warning, promising, or declaring, depending on context. Subsequent scholars, including Levinson (1983) and Mey (2001), further expanded pragmatic inquiry by emphasizing the role of context, shared knowledge, and cultural norms in shaping meaning. However, despite the theoretical robustness of Speech Act Theory, much of its empirical application has centered on Western languages and contexts. There remains limited research applying these frameworks systematically to African indigenous languages, particularly coastal Bantu languages such as Kigiryama. Moreover, the intersection between speech acts and social justice—especially within marginalized communities—has received little sustained attention. This gap is particularly significant given that speech acts play a central role in negotiating authority, legitimacy, hierarchy, and communal harmony in African societies.

Closely related to Speech Act Theory is politeness theory, particularly the influential work of Brown and Levinson (1987), who conceptualize politeness in terms of “face” and the mitigation of face-threatening acts. Their model distinguishes between positive politeness (affirming solidarity) and negative politeness (minimizing imposition). While widely applied across languages, the universality of this framework has been questioned, especially in non-Western settings. Scholars such as Nwoye (1992) and Watts (2003) argue that African societies often emphasize communal face and relational harmony rather than individual autonomy. Studies conducted in West African languages have shown that indirectness, metaphor, and ritualized greetings are central to maintaining social cohesion. However, East African languages remain comparatively underrepresented in this body of scholarship. In particular, there is limited empirical documentation of how politeness and indirectness operate in Mijikenda languages and how these pragmatic strategies intersect with contemporary sociopolitical issues such as land disputes, electoral discourse, and access to justice. In the case of the Kigiryama, linguistic forms such as plural self-reference, euphemism, and proverb use function not merely as politeness markers but as mechanisms for sustaining hierarchy and solidarity. The absence of systematic pragmatic studies of these features constitutes a significant scholarly gap.

African oral literature has long been recognized as a repository of cultural values and moral instruction. Finnegan (2012) and Yankah (1989), among others, demonstrate that proverbs and oral narratives function rhetorically to advise, persuade, caution, and resolve disputes. Proverbs in particular encode communal wisdom and regulate behavior across generations. Yet much of this scholarship approaches oral forms from literary or anthropological perspectives rather than from a pragmatic or speech act framework. The performative force of proverbs—how they function as indirect directives, assertives, or commissives within interaction—remains under-theorized. Additionally, few studies examine how oral traditions operate within contemporary sociopolitical contexts, such as community mobilization, advocacy for land rights, or political legitimization. Although historical and ethnographic works on the Mijikenda, including those by Spear (1978), Willis (1993), and Parkin (1972), provide valuable insights into cultural organization and the significance of the *kaya* system, they do not offer detailed linguistic analyses of pragmatic usage in present-day justice-oriented discourse. Consequently, there is a need for research that integrates oral literature, pragmatics, and contemporary sociopolitical realities.

The relationship between language and power has been extensively examined within critical discourse studies. Fairclough (1989) and Blommaert (2005) argue that language both reflects and reproduces social inequalities, shaping access to institutional participation and legitimacy. Gee (2014) further emphasizes that discourse

constructs identities and determines whose knowledge counts within particular social contexts. In African settings, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) critique the dominance of colonial languages, highlighting the cultural and epistemic marginalization of indigenous languages. Language policy scholars such as Bamgbose (1991) and Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000) document how the prioritization of English and Kiswahili in education, governance, and legal systems often disadvantages speakers of local languages. While these studies illuminate macro-level structural inequalities, they seldom provide micro-level analyses of how everyday communicative practices in indigenous languages function as tools of resistance, advocacy, or empowerment. There remains limited empirical research demonstrating how pragmatic strategies in local languages mediate access to land rights, legal processes, employment, and political participation.

Research on mother-tongue education similarly underscores the importance of indigenous languages for cognitive development, identity formation, and educational success (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). However, implementation challenges and sociolinguistic hierarchies continue to privilege national and colonial languages in formal domains. Few studies examine how local pragmatic norms shape classroom interaction, learner engagement, or community perceptions of schooling. Even fewer link indigenous language use to broader questions of justice, equity, and empowerment within multilingual states such as Kenya. In the Agiryama context, language serves not only pedagogical purposes but also reinforces communal unity and cultural continuity. The pragmatic dimensions of these processes remain insufficiently documented.

Taken together, existing scholarship establishes that language performs social action, that politeness and indirectness vary culturally, that African oral traditions encode moral and social norms, and that dominant language policies contribute to marginalization. However, several significant gaps remain. First, there is an empirical gap concerning the pragmatic analysis of Kigiryama and other Mijikenda languages. Second, there is a theoretical gap in applying and adapting Speech Act Theory within African communal contexts. Third, there is an applied gap linking indigenous pragmatics to concrete social justice issues such as land rights, political representation, legal access, and educational equity. Finally, Kenyan coastal communities remain underrepresented in broader discussions within linguistic anthropology and discourse studies.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a systematic analysis of Kigiryama pragmatic strategies within real sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. By foregrounding speech acts, indirectness, and oral forms as mechanisms through which equity is negotiated and cultural identity sustained, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how indigenous language practices function as pathways to social justice and community empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Speech Act Theory, which views language as action performed within social contexts. This framework is complemented by politeness theory, particularly the concepts of face, indirectness, and mitigation, which are central to Kigiryama interaction. Together, these perspectives enable an analysis of how linguistic forms perform cultural and social work within communities.

Guided by Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), this study analyses Kigiryama utterances not merely as grammatical constructions but as performative actions embedded in cultural context. Utterances such as pluralized requests to elders, proverbs employed in political discourse, euphemisms surrounding sensitive issues, and metaphorical praise forms are examined at the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels. The analysis reveals that Kigiryama speech acts function as mechanisms of deference, moral regulation, communal solidarity, and sociopolitical mobilisation. By foregrounding the performative dimension of indigenous language use, the study demonstrates how pragmatics serves as a pathway to equity and social justice within the Agiryama community.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative ethnographic design because of its suitability for examining language within natural sociocultural contexts. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and audio recordings of naturally occurring interactions. Participants included elders,

teachers, religious leaders, youth, women leaders, community activists, radio presenters, and local administrators.

The data were analyzed thematically and discursively. Recurring pragmatic patterns were identified and interpreted in relation to social context, cultural norms, and communicative goals

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Pragmatic Encoding of Cultural Values

The findings demonstrate that Kigiryama pragmatics is a powerful carrier of cultural values, particularly respect (*heshima*), communal solidarity, and harmony. Respect is linguistically encoded through plural self-reference when addressing elders (e.g., *funamvoya* “we request” instead of *nakuvoya* “I request”), signaling humility and deference. Lexical choices such as the respectful use of *mufadzi* (“the late”) instead of direct references to death further illustrate pragmatic sensitivity.

Indirectness and figurative language are central norms in Kigiryama interaction. Proverbs, metaphors, and similes are routinely employed to advise, criticize, or persuade without threatening face. For instance, metaphors equating helpful individuals to revered figures or comparing undesirable behavior to familiar animals allow speakers to convey meaning tactfully while preserving social cohesion.

Pragmatics of Sensitive Topics

Sensitive issues such as sexuality, rape (*ahendwa maitsi*), witchcraft, illness, and bodily functions are addressed through euphemism, metaphors, short stories, and anecdotes. For example, when tackling cases of marital conflict, elders may make use of proverbs such as:

- *Ngira mbiri zaremeza fisi* (“Two wrongs do not make a right”)
- *Kakuna ajeri airi* (“There are no two truthful people”)
- *Kuna rero na machero* (“There is today and tomorrow”)

Another commonly cited proverb states:

Thamaa ni moho wa mtsani; ukiashwa, huocha nyumba yosi.

(“Lust is a stranger’s fire; once lit, it burns the whole homestead.”)

This pragmatic strategy minimizes shame, avoids confrontation, and maintains dignity for both speaker and hearer. The avoidance of direct accusation in matters such as witchcraft reflects both cultural caution and the social consequences of explicit blame.

Most importantly, among the Agiryama, proverbs are:

- Instruments of indirect correction
- Mechanisms of de-escalation
- Carriers of communal authority
- Tools for moral regulation
- Devices for consensus building
- Preventive safeguards against conflict

They are not merely ornamental language but active social technologies of peace.

Language, Education, and Socialization

In educational contexts, Kigiryama plays a crucial role in cultural transmission and cognitive development. The use of the mother tongue enhances comprehension, critical thinking, and learner participation. Proverbs emphasizing the importance of cultural roots underscore the belief that abandoning one's language leads to cultural dependency and loss of identity.

Examples include:

- *Mricha mila ni mtumwa* ("One who abandons traditions is a slave")
- *Uyira kikwenu kikwakole mwenye* ("Return to your roots to be saved")

Kigiryama also functions as a unifying force among learners, fostering solidarity and shared understanding.

Kigiryama as a Marker of Ethnic Identity

Kigiryama serves as a primary symbol of Agiryama identity. Speaking the language distinguishes members of the community from other ethnic groups along the Kenyan coast and inland communities. Through Kigiryama, individuals express belonging to Agiryama cultural heritage.

Oral traditions, folktales, songs, and proverbs reinforce collective identity, while naming practices, greetings, and clan expressions maintain cultural continuity.

Examples of greetings and expressions include:

- *Kamnautu!*
- *Mudzalamukadze!*
- *Mudzasindadze!*
- *Bamudzhere*
- *Ahu misomo*
- *Tsangazimi mamuhoho kidzhere*

These expressions immediately identify one as part of the Agiryama social structure.

Language and Elders' Authority

Among the Agiryama, elders occupy positions of authority, and Kigiryama is central in legitimizing that authority. Elders use culturally respected speech forms such as:

- Proverbs (*Ndhumo*)
- Blessings (*Kuhasa*)
- Ritual language (*Taireni za Mulungu! Funavoya madzo! Nagadze!*)
- Indirect expressions and metaphors

These speech styles symbolize wisdom and social superiority. Younger members are expected to respond respectfully using appropriate honorifics and polite forms. Failure to use respectful language may be interpreted as defiance or disrespect toward authority.

Thus, language becomes a mechanism for maintaining hierarchy and social order.

Kigiryama in Conflict Resolution and Governance

Traditional dispute resolution among the Agiryama relies heavily on oral negotiation conducted in Kigiryama. During clan meetings or mediation sessions, elders employ persuasive language and proverbs to restore harmony.

Strategic silence, repetition, and figurative language are used to negotiate peace, while linguistic competence often determines one's influence in communal deliberations. The ability to speak eloquently in Kigiryama enhances social prestige and leadership recognition within the community.

Gender and Power Relations

Kigiryama also reflects gender roles and power relations within society. Certain speech norms are socially associated with men or women:

- Men traditionally dominate public deliberative speech spaces such as council meetings
- Women may employ more indirect or respectful forms in addressing elders or husbands
- Ceremonial songs and women's oral performances provide women with alternative spaces of influence and resistance

Through language choices, speakers negotiate social expectations and gendered identities.

Kigiryama and Cultural Preservation

The language preserves indigenous knowledge systems, including:

- Traditional medicine
- Agricultural practices
- Environmental conservation knowledge
- Spiritual beliefs and rituals

Control over sacred linguistic knowledge often grants authority to ritual specialists and elders. Certain cultural expressions may only be understood fully by initiated members, reinforcing social boundaries and cultural power.

Code-Switching and Modern Identity Negotiation

Many Agiryama speakers today alternate between Kigiryama, Kiswahili, and English depending on social context. This code-switching helps negotiate modern identities:

- Kigiryama signals solidarity, cultural authenticity, and local identity
- Kiswahili may indicate national belonging and interethnic communication
- English often symbolizes education, modernity, and socioeconomic mobility

Young people strategically switch languages to position themselves socially in schools, workplaces, and urban settings.

Language as Resistance and Cultural Pride

The continued use of Kigiryama resists cultural erosion and linguistic marginalization. Promoting the language in education, music, media, and ceremonies strengthens community pride and challenges the dominance of global and national languages.

Using Kigiryama in public spaces asserts the legitimacy and visibility of Agiryama culture within broader Kenyan society.

Kigiryama functions as more than a communication tool within the Agiryama community. It is deeply intertwined with social authority, cultural identity, power relations, and communal values. Through speech practices, oral traditions, and language choices, members of the community negotiate respect, belonging, leadership, and modern social identities. Consequently, Kigiryama remains central to the preservation and negotiation of Agiryama cultural life.

Language and Social Justice Advocacy

The study reveals that Kigiryama is actively used in community mobilization, political messaging, and advocacy. Proverbs and metaphors are employed to discuss leadership, caution against ethnic favoritism, and legitimize elder authority.

This is effectively illustrated through proverbs such as:

Chala kimwenga kaki banda tsaha

("One finger cannot kill lice.")

This proverb communicates the importance of unity and collective action.

Community radio stations broadcasting in Kigiryama play a significant role in disseminating information on land rights, civic participation, health, and emergency response. Examples include:

- Kaya FM
- Msenangu FM

However, structural inequalities limit the effectiveness of these efforts. Legal, educational, and economic systems operate predominantly in English and Kiswahili, marginalizing Kigiryama speakers. As a result, many community members struggle to access justice, secure employment, or defend land rights due to language barriers. A case in point is that many words, expressions & terminologies in court proceedings may not be understood to an extent that one may accept wrong doing when indeed he/she is innocent

How Kigiryama can be leveraged to promote social justice

Kigiryama can promote social justice by serving as a medium for civic education, rights awareness, and community dialogue in culturally resonant forms such as proverbs, storytelling, and traditional dispute resolution forums. Using Kigiryama in legal literacy campaigns, health communication, land rights discussions, and gender equity advocacy ensures inclusivity, particularly for elders and rural populations who may have limited proficiency in English or Kiswahili. By centering indigenous language in public discourse, the community affirms linguistic dignity and reduces structural exclusion rooted in language hierarchies.

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The role local radio stations play in linguistic empowerment

Local radio stations play a crucial role by broadcasting in Kigiryama, thereby normalizing its public use and validating it as a language of knowledge, governance, and development. They provide platforms for community debate, call-in discussions, cultural programming, and rights-based conversations in accessible language. This fosters participation, preserves oral traditions, strengthens intergenerational transmission, and democratizes access to information, particularly for populations excluded from digital or English-dominated media spaces.

How digital platforms can support language preservation

Digital platforms can support language preservation by creating online spaces for Kigiryama content production, including podcasts, short videos, digital storytelling, language-learning apps, and social media pages that promote vocabulary, idioms, and cultural narratives. Digitizing oral histories and proverbs ensures archival preservation while engaging younger generations in contemporary formats. By integrating Kigiryama into social media and mobile communication, the language gains visibility, relevance, and adaptability in modern communicative domains.

Policy changes that can strengthen indigenous language inclusion

Policy changes should include formal recognition and operationalization of indigenous languages in local governance, early childhood education, public service delivery, and judicial processes. Curriculum reforms should support mother-tongue-based multilingual education, particularly in lower primary levels. The Ministry of Education on language (2015) proposes that learners in lower primary should be taught in the language of the catchment area. Additionally, funding should be allocated for indigenous language media production, teacher training, and language documentation initiatives. Institutionalizing indigenous language use moves it from symbolic recognition to functional inclusion.

How pragmatic features can be integrated into advocacy strategies?

Pragmatic features such as honorifics, indirectness, culturally appropriate speech acts, and proverb usage can be strategically incorporated into advocacy to align messages with local norms of respect and authority. Framing rights-based discourse through culturally valued communicative forms enhances legitimacy and reduces resistance. For example, invoking traditional idioms about fairness or communal harmony can make social justice messaging culturally persuasive while maintaining alignment with indigenous epistemologies.

Politics and Representation

Political messages are framed in Kigiryama using proverbs, indirect language and songs. Katana Ngala having moved to Ganze from Kaloleni, during political campaigns was asked, ‘Favoya ndhenge, vino fudzapata yehu, ino ya kuvoya fuihendedze? Which was a rhetorical question referring to the fact that Katana Ngala did not belong and he was not one of their own. Since he did not understand the underlying meaning he answered, ‘let us return it’. This ended his political career in Ganze because proverbs tend to shape perceptions of leadership. In the case of Katana Ngala, the people of Ganze considered anyone not from Ganze as being an outsider while themselves as owners. Foro kwao ni nyika. This means that the mgiryama should go back to nyika”

Similarly, during community meetings consensus was built linguistically through use of metaphors, proverbs and indirect language. For instance, Zha kunini vibaki kunini meaning whatever, was agreed during the meeting should not be discussed anywhere else.

In addition, among the Agiryama, language influences voter mobilization when it is used to show unity and sometimes disunity, and mobilization. Tsaha akengwa na mahe referring to the use of handouts. Nanasi rinukadzho so ritsamadzo referring to a candidate who does not seem to likely have a chance of winning,

Nyenyezi ya kihoho kaialala, referring to a candidate who seems young. Hawe nzingo wagamala mwenye-meaning a candidate who failed. Muyu uvungwa ni mitsatsa, meaning that an elderly respectable person will always have people following him. Hamadhi ni arirye kidondoni meaning that what you have is what will assist you in your time of need.

Challenges and Opportunities

Key challenges include language shift among younger generations, negative attitudes toward indigenous languages, and restrictive language policies. Nevertheless, opportunities exist in the revitalization of oral literature, integration of Kigiryama into education, community-driven documentation, and the use of digital media and local radio to amplify indigenous voices.

Implications

The findings underscore the inseparability of language, culture, and social justice. Preserving and promoting Kigiryama is not merely a cultural endeavor but a necessary step toward equitable participation in governance, education, and economic life. Language-sensitive policies and advocacy strategies that align with local pragmatic norms are more likely to succeed and empower marginalized communities.

Recommendations

Future studies should incorporate comparative data across Mijikenda subgroups and employ longitudinal methods to track pragmatic shifts. Researchers should critically adapt Speech Act Theory to communal African epistemologies rather than applying Western frameworks uncritically. Practically, stakeholders should develop mother-tongue-based multilingual education materials, train teachers in Kigiryama pragmatics, and fund community-led digital documentation. Policy makers must operationalize indigenous language inclusion in courts, local governance, and early childhood curricula to ensure functional, not merely symbolic, equity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that Kigiryama pragmatics functions as a powerful pathway to equity, identity formation, and social justice among the Agiryama community. Through indirectness, respect markers, proverbs, metaphor, and code-switching practices, the language sustains cultural values while enabling community engagement and mediating contemporary sociopolitical realities. Addressing linguistic marginalization and supporting indigenous language use are therefore essential for advancing inclusivity, cultural preservation, and social justice in multilingual societies.

The study further shows that indigenous languages are not peripheral cultural remnants but dynamic communicative systems deeply implicated in governance, education, advocacy, conflict resolution, and democratic participation.

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