

PRESIDENTIAL SPEECHES IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES (2010-2024): ACCOMMODATION OR TOKENISM?

EZE, George Ogazi Mani (PhD)

(ORCID ID: [https:// orcid.org/0009-0008-6765-6123](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6765-6123))

georgeeze350@gmail.com. (+234) 803 867 1590; 0805 600 6284

**Department of Mass Communication, Ignatius Ajuru University of
Education,
Port Harcourt, Nigeria.**

Abstract

Africa as multilingual societies, the political leaders usually employ indigenous languages in public addresses to associate with diverse audiences. This study examined the usage of indigenous languages in presidential speeches. It investigated whether such rhetorical strategies signified genuine communicative accommodation or mere symbolic tokenism. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was used to encapsulate the study. It critically analysed select presidential speeches delivered in indigenous languages in Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya. The study explored the linguistic choices, situational contexts, audience demographics, and rhetorical intentions behind the deployment of local languages. The research employed a qualitative content analysis of speech transcripts and televised addresses, the research identified patterns of convergence and divergence in political discourse. The findings suggested that while the usage of indigenous languages can foster cultural legitimacy; evoke emotional resonance, and bridge identity divides, its occasional and performative disposition often served as a political strategy to gain short-term favour rather than a sustained effort at inclusive governance. The analysis revealed that in many occurrences, indigenous language usage is confined to ceremonial, campaign, or festive contexts, with limited follow-up in policy or engagement. This study concluded that the communicative power of indigenous languages is underutilised and regularly instrumentalised. It thereby, recommended institutional frameworks for multilingual presidential communication that replicate genuine accommodation, national integration, and linguistic justice. This research had contributed to discourses on political communication, postcolonial language politics, and the ethics of representation in African governance.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, Political Communication, Communication Accommodation Theory, Tokenism, Presidential Speech, Multilingualism.

Introduction

Language serves as both a means of communication and a reflection of identity, power, and politics. In many postcolonial African nations, where speaking multiple languages is the norm, the choice of language in official discussions carries significant symbolic and strategic weight. Presidential speeches are among the most prominent and impactful platforms for national dialogue, often shaping the atmosphere of inclusion, authority, and belonging. Yet, numerous African countries still favor former colonial languages like English, French, and Portuguese in their official communications, while the indigenous languages, spoken by the majority, are often pushed to the sidelines, used only in informal or ceremonial contexts.

Scholars studying political discourse have long maintained that the choice of language in elite communication is deeply ideological (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009). Political leaders strategically use language to connect with specific audiences, forge collective identities, and navigate power dynamics (Chilton, 2004). In multilingual settings, these interactions become even more intricate. Indigenous languages can serve as symbols of authenticity, unity, and cultural closeness, especially in societies where colonial languages dominate governance and administration (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998; Bamgbose, 2000).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Giles and his team (Giles & Ogay, 2007; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991), offers a valuable lens for examining these linguistic changes. CAT suggests that speakers modify their communication styles through convergence, divergence, or maintenance to manage social distance and achieve their interpersonal objectives. When applied to presidential speeches, using indigenous languages can indicate a desire for inclusivity and connection with marginalized communities. On the other hand, minimal or superficial uses of indigenous languages, like brief greetings or proverbs, may come off

as token gestures that lack genuine engagement.

In the complex world of African politics, where language is intricately linked to ethnicity, postcolonial identity, and nation-building (Adegbija, 2004; Prah, 2009), analyzing presidential speeches through the lens of Critical Applied Linguistics (CAT) provides valuable insights into whether the use of indigenous languages truly fosters participatory democracy or simply reinforces symbolic politics. This study delves into the spectrum of accommodation and tokenism in presidential speeches, placing linguistic choices within the larger discussions on multilingual governance and political legitimacy.

Statement of the Problem

Language is one of the most hotly debated and symbolically loaded resources in postcolonial African nations. Even though many countries have constitutionally recognised multilingualism, governance and high-level political communication are still largely dominated by former colonial languages like English and French (Bamgbose, 2000; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). Presidential speeches, which are seen as authoritative state texts, are often delivered mainly in these foreign languages, even when most citizens are more fluent in their indigenous tongues. This linguistic situation raises important questions about democratic inclusion, accessibility, and fair representation in multilingual societies (Adegbija, 2004; Prah, 2009).

Recently, however, there has been a noticeable uptick in the strategic use of indigenous languages in presidential discourse. Leaders sometimes sprinkle in greetings, idioms, proverbs, or even longer passages in local languages during national broadcasts, campaign rallies, and commemorative events. While these practices are often hailed as signs of cultural acknowledgment and inclusive leadership, there's a lack of thorough investigation into whether these linguistic changes represent true communicative accommodation or are merely symbolic gestures aimed at gaining political legitimacy. Scholars of political discourse warn that such

symbolic acts can obscure deeper power imbalances and perpetuate the dominance of elite linguistic norms (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) offers a valuable perspective for assessing whether shifts in language help bridge social gaps (convergence) or are merely a tactic for managing one's image without any real change (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Giles & Ogay, 2007). However, most of the current applications of CAT have primarily concentrated on interpersonal or institutional communication, leaving a noticeable gap when it comes to high-level political discussions in African settings. As a result, there's a lack of clear scholarly insight into how presidents' use of indigenous languages fits into the spectrum between genuine accommodation and mere tokenism.

The main issue, then, is the lack of a systematic, theory-based examination of how indigenous languages are utilised in presidential speeches. This analysis is crucial to understand whether these practices genuinely foster democratic inclusion or simply perpetuate symbolic politics in the multilingual landscape of African nations.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the contexts and communicative strategies behind the use of indigenous languages in presidential speeches in select African countries.
2. To analyse the communicative intentions behind the use of indigenous languages within presidential discourse.
3. To assess whether the use of indigenous languages reflects genuine communicative accommodation or symbolic tokenism, using the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory.
4. To evaluate the implications of indigenous language usage in presidential discourse for political inclusion, national identity, and multilingual governance.
5. To propose recommendations for integrating genuine

multilingualism in presidential and national political communication.

Research Questions

1. In what contexts and frequencies are indigenous languages used in presidential speeches across selected African countries?
2. What communicative strategies and intentions underlie the presidents' choice to use indigenous languages?
3. To what extent do these practices align with the principles of Communication Accommodation Theory?
4. Are indigenous languages used consistently and systematically in governance, or are they deployed symbolically and performatively?
5. What are the audience perceptions and political consequences of presidential use of indigenous languages in national communication?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles (1973), as a lens to analyse how African presidents adapt their communicative behaviour particularly their use of indigenous languages in response to audience characteristics, sociopolitical dynamics, and identity considerations. CAT explains how individuals adjust their speech styles to either converge (seek approval, reduce social distance) or diverge (emphasise difference, assert identity), depending on the social context and communicative goals (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991).

In multilingual African states, where ethnic identity and language are deeply intertwined, CAT offers an ideal framework to interrogate how political figures employ indigenous languages in speeches to accommodate diverse linguistic communities, foster national cohesion, or appeal to local identities (Ihemere, 2006; Akindele & Adegbite, 2005). Convergence, in this context, may involve switching from the dominant colonial language such as English or French to a local language to foster solidarity and cultural

belonging. However, such rhetorical strategies may also exhibit pseudo-accommodation where superficial or strategic use of indigenous languages serves symbolic purposes rather than genuine inclusion (Thompson, 2018).

Moreover, CAT integrates elements of Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that communicative behaviour is influenced by group affiliation and the desire to maintain or negotiate group status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Harwood et al., 1993). African presidents, therefore, may utilise indigenous languages as identity markers, to align themselves with certain ethnic constituencies or to signal cultural rootedness during national events (Obeng, 2002). In this way, CAT helps disentangle whether the use of indigenous languages in presidential communication reflects authentic convergence indicative of inclusive governance or tokenistic performance, shaped by electoral interests and symbolic politics (Egbokhare & Ogunsiji, 2001).

The application of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to this study is crucial for understanding how language choices in presidential speeches function as tools for social negotiation, political messaging, and identity construction in Africa's complex linguistic landscapes. In particular, CAT provides a nuanced lens to evaluate whether the use of indigenous languages by presidents signifies genuine attempts at communicative convergence aimed at reducing linguistic and cultural distance from the audience or whether it is a superficial display of cultural sensitivity serving symbolic or electoral purposes. In the African context, where language is deeply embedded in ethnic, regional, and historical narratives (Bamgbose, 1991; Egbokhare, 2004), presidents' speech patterns carry profound implications. CAT enables this study to critically assess how such linguistic accommodations are received by diverse constituencies, and whether they result in enhanced political legitimacy, national cohesion, or instead reinforce cultural marginalisation when inconsistently applied.

Moreover, CAT's emphasis on the social motivations behind

communicative behaviour (Giles et al., 1991) is particularly relevant for analysing presidential rhetoric, which often seeks to construct an inclusive national image while navigating regional and ethnic divides. The theory supports the investigation into whether indigenous language usage in speeches is followed by substantive policy actions or merely functions as discursive tokenism, thus helping to differentiate between performative and transformative communication. Finally, CAT's embeddedness in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) allows the study to interrogate the role of language in signaling in-group membership, fostering cultural legitimacy, and managing intergroup relations within multicultural African societies. In essence, CAT provides the analytical tools and conceptual clarity needed to explore the symbolic, strategic, and political dimensions of indigenous language use in presidential communication making it highly relevant for this investigation into African political discourse.

Review of literature

Language and Political Communication: Language plays a central role in political communication, functioning not only as a medium for transmitting messages but also as a tool for identity construction, legitimacy, and power negotiation. Political language in Africa is especially complex due to the multilingual and postcolonial nature of its societies. According to Chilton (2004), political discourse often involves strategic language use to manage perceptions, maintain authority, and appeal to specific groups. In African contexts, the choice between colonial languages and indigenous languages in official communication often reflects underlying power dynamics and historical tensions (Bamgbose, 1991).

Studying political communication across different age groups has become more relevant because of quickly evolving technology and changing civic attitudes. Strauss and Howe (1991) outlined the different generational cohorts as socio-historical constructs and developed an explanation as to why their attitudes towards authority, communication and technology differ

as a result of their unique socio-historical experiences. And in this context, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), identified by Howard Giles in 1973, explains how political representatives speak and communicate

Indigenous Languages and Symbolic Politics

The concept of symbolic politics is relevant to the analysis of indigenous language use in presidential speeches. Symbolic gestures such as speaking a local language at public events can be powerful tools for legitimising leadership and affirming national identity (Edelman, 1985). However, when such gestures are not supported by institutional policy or consistent use, they risk becoming tokenistic, serving symbolic rather than substantive purposes (Thompson, 2018). In this context, tokenism refers to the occasional and superficial deployment of indigenous languages for political effect, without meaningful integration into the structures of governance or national development.

Communication Accommodation and Social Identity

Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) provides a theoretical foundation for analysing the strategies political leaders use when adjusting their speech patterns. In convergence, the adaptation of language to match that of the audience is often used to build solidarity and rapport, while divergence maintains social or ethnic boundaries. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) further explains how such communicative acts function to establish in-group or out-group dynamics. In the African political context, the selective use of indigenous languages may reinforce identity politics, or alternatively, attempt to transcend them.

Several studies have examined the strategic use of language by Nigerian political leaders. Ihemere (2006) notes that Nigerian presidents often revert to indigenous languages during campaigns or at ethnically

significant events. However, quickly revert to English in policy speeches or state functions. Egbokhare and Ogunsiji (2001) highlight how this trend reflects a symbolic engagement with multilingualism, rather than a commitment to linguistic inclusivity in governance.

Eze (2026), in a study “Politics and intergenerational communication: The CAT applicability” investigated how politicians adapted their communication styles across generational divides, using Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as a central analytical lens. The study situated itself with in the context of contemporary African democracies, specifically Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa-where generational dynamics increasingly influenced political participation and civic engagement. Drawing on both qualitative discourse analysis and cross-national comparisons, the study evaluated political speech patterns, platform choices, and framing strategies aimed at engaging Gen Z, Millennials, and older generational cohorts. Examples of data sources were political speeches, campaign artifacts, and publicly available posts by select political figures on social media. In terms of CAT's central strategies, convergence, divergence and maintenance, emphasis was placed on the ways politicians reduce, amplify or sustain communicative distance with audience members from various generations. Results showed an incredible convergence towards youth focused political discourse in the digital realm in Nigeria and Kenya. In contrast, politicians in South Africa adopted a formal discourse strategy, especially on traditional media, to distance themselves from older people and to sustain elder-centric communicative messages. These differences illustrated the impact of age, culture and technology on political communication.

In Kenya, Mwangi (2017) investigated the speeches of former President Uhuru Kenyatta and observed that while Kiswahili and local dialects were occasionally used, these languages were primarily reserved for emotive moments during election campaigns. The study concluded that the

use of indigenous languages was instrumental and lacked long-term integration into national discourse. Similarly, Obonyo and Nyamboga (2018) argue that political code-switching in Kenya serves as a calculated move to mobilise ethnic loyalty, often without broader implications for language policy or inclusion.

In post-apartheid South Africa, studies show a more institutionalised effort toward linguistic accommodation. According to Webb (2002), presidents like Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki occasionally used multiple indigenous languages in national addresses to symbolise unity. However, Heugh (2009) argues that while symbolic inclusion was evident, there was still a functional dominance of English in governance, education, and media. Thus, despite a more visible effort at multilingualism, real systemic change remained limited.

Research has also explored how citizens interpret the use of indigenous languages by their leaders. Adegoju (2008) examined audience reactions to political speeches in Yoruba and found that language choice enhanced emotional engagement and trust. However, audiences were quick to distinguish between genuine linguistic accommodation and rhetorical performance responding critically when language use was perceived as insincere or manipulative.

Again, Eze (2025), in 'Africa's Lingual-Balkanization: Colonial language divides, regional integration and political mobilisation' review that integration efforts by the African Union and sub-regional organisations such as ECOWAS and SADC are often disadvantaged by linguistic divergence, which frequently undermines their functional effectiveness and institutional legitimacy. As a powerful instrument of identity and mobilisation, language simultaneously operates as an enabling and constraining force: it facilitates transnational elite discourse through colonial languages while marginalising indigenous linguistic epistemologies. This dynamic complicates pan-African political

organisation and grassroots participation, as vernacular languages remain systematically undervalued in political processes. Moreover, linguistic divisions often intersect with geopolitical contestations and ideological cleavages, contributing to structural incapacities within post-colonial states. Drawing on examples from Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone, and Arabophone regions, this paper examines how colonial language legacies shape regional affiliations, diplomatic relations, and electoral communication strategies. The study interrogates the paradox of language as both a unifying and divisive force within the African polity. Employing critical discourse analysis and a historical-comparative approach, the study demonstrates how language policies may either bridge or deepen existing sociopolitical cleavages. The paper concludes by proposing a model of moderate linguistic pluralism that prioritises indigenous languages as strategic instruments in diplomacy and development. Such recalibration may advance Africa's pursuit of deeper integration, cultural decolonisation, and enhanced political inclusion across the continent.

The reviewed literature reveals that while African presidents occasionally use indigenous languages in speeches, such usage often remains symbolic, inconsistent, and lacking institutional backing. Communication Accommodation Theory provides a relevant explanatory model, especially when combined with Social Identity Theory, to unpack the political, psychological, and sociolinguistic dimensions of this practice. However, there is a gap in comparative, multi-country analyses that systematically evaluate whether such language choices constitute authentic convergence or tokenistic gesture across different African political contexts.

Moreover, few studies have examined the longitudinal implications of indigenous language use in presidential rhetoric, whether occasional convergence leads to deeper policy changes or remains merely a rhetorical device. This study seeks to fill this gap by critically analysing presidential speeches in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, supported by audience

perception data and expert interviews, within the framework of CAT.

Methodology

This study embraced a qualitative multiple case study design, suitable for examining complex communicative behaviours and symbolic practices across diverse political and cultural contexts. The study focused on Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, the countries with effervescent multilingual settings and histories of political speechmaking. The study probed the extent, intent, and reception of indigenous language use in presidential speeches. The case study approach allowed for comparative analysis across different sociolinguistic and political environments while enabling a deeper contextual understanding of how presidents navigate language choices (Yin, 2018). Qualitative inquiry was particularly appropriate because the research intended to interpret symbolic meaning, political motivation, and audience perception rather than quantify usage patterns alone.

The study targeted Presidential speeches delivered between 2010 and 2024 as the population and scope. The contexts including Independence Day Celebrations, Campaign Rallies, Policy Addresses, and National Emergencies. The analysis spanned speeches of Presidents Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Ahmed Tinubu (Nigeria), Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto (Kenya), and Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa (South Africa). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select ten (10) speeches per country that include partial or full use of indigenous languages. This sampling ensured the inclusion of both textual artifacts and expert interpretations needed for in-depth analysis. Document Analysis was handled through official transcripts and audiovisual recordings of presidential speeches obtained from: Government archives, State broadcasting agencies, Presidential social media platforms and websites. The speeches were reviewed for language choice (indigenous vs. colonial), rhetorical context and purpose and duration and depth of indigenous

language usage. Academic articles, media commentary, and policy documents related to language use in political communication will complement primary data.

Thematic Content Analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach, speeches and interview transcripts were coded using categories such as: Convergence or divergence, Cultural symbolism, Electoral appeal, and Linguistic consistency. And **NVivo** qualitative data software aided in organising and visualising themes. Application of CAT Framework were done using Communication Accommodation Theory, the analysis which classified language use as: Authentic convergence (genuine inclusion), Pseudo-convergence/tokenism (superficial accommodation), or Divergence (deliberate distancing). Also, in a Comparative Analysis, patterns and differences in the use and perception of indigenous language across the three countries were examined to identifying the political context influences, the public reception and media framing, and the degree of integration into institutional communication norms.

Data Presentation

Table 1: A Cross-Country Matrix

S/NO	Theme	Nigeria	Kenya	South Africa
1.	Constitutional recognition of indigenous languages	Partial	Moderate	High
2.	Frequency of indigenous language use in presidential speeches	Low to Moderate	Low	Moderate
3.	Audience perception (trust/authenticity)	Mixed	Skeptical	Generally positive
4.	CAT Category (dominant)	Pseudo-convergence	Divergence/Tokenism	Mixed convergence

Table 2: Comparative Summary

Country	Language Strategy	Dominant CAT Pattern	Implications
Nigeria	English + fleeting indigenous phrases	Pseudo-accommodation / tokenism	The Implications in the above table analysis was that in Nigeria indigenous language used symbolically, lacking depth or policy support.
Kenya	English + Swahili (no vernacular)	Limited convergence	While in Kenya , Swahili inclusion fosters national unity, but real engagement with ethnic diversity remains minimal.
South Africa	Inclusive multilingual addresses & policy follow-up	Authentic convergence	Whereas, in South Africa speeches and institutional actions reflected a broader embrace of multilingualism, a potential model for integration. Further subjecting these examples through the CAT lens revealed that indigenous language use ranged from tokenistic gestures to genuine accommodation , indicating the importance of consistency, audience targeting, and systemic support in presidential communication.

Table 3: Presidential Speeches in Indigenous Languages cross-country thematic comparison.

No.	Country	President	Occasion/Year	Indigenous Language (s) Used	Purpose/ Theme	Rhetorical Strategy	CAT Classification
1	Nigeria	Goodluck Jonathan	Independence Day 2011	Hausa/ Yoruba greetings	National unity	Ceremonial inclusion	Tokenism
2	Nigeria	Goodluck Jonathan	Campaign Rally 2015 (Enugu)	Igbo slogans	Regional mobilisation	Ethnic resonance	Convergence
3	Nigeria	Muhammadu Buhari	Eid-el-Fitr 2017	Hausa idioms	Religious solidarity	Faith-based affinity	Tokenism
4	Nigeria	Muhammadu Buhari	COVID-19 Address 2020	None	Health crisis response	Technocratic language	Divergence
5.	Nigeria	Muhammadu Buhari	Independence Day Broadcast – 1st October 2022	Hausa	‘National unity’ and ‘religious harmony’.	invocation and for cultural softening	Tokenism
6.	Nigeria	Muhammadu Buhari	Eid-el-Fitr Speech – May 2021	Hausa	Religious Affinity’	‘Identity Appeal’	‘Tokenism’
7.		Bola Ahmed Tinubu	Campaign Rally – Kaduna State, January 2023	Hausa	‘Inclusion, Triumphalism’	‘Crowd Mobilization’	‘Convergence’

8.	Nigeria	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	Unity Day 2023	Yoruba & Hausa	Nationhood	Inclusive greeting	Limited Convergence
9.	Nigeria	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	Town Hall in Ibadan – October 2023	Yoruba	Ethnic appeal, inclusiveness	Cultural affiliation	Convergence
10	Nigeria	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	Campaign Speech – Onitsha, Anambra State, Feb 2023	Igbo	Regional engagement	Identity bridging	Convergence
11	Kenya	Mwai Kibaki	Jamhuri Day 2010	Kiswahili	State development	Standard national address	National Convergence
12	Kenya	Uhuru Kenyatta	Mashujaa Day 2016 (Nairobi)	Kiswahili + Kikuyu	Regional identity	Cultural pride	Limited Convergence
13	Kenya	Uhuru Kenyatta	COVID-19 Update 2021	Kiswahili	Public health	Accessible governance	Convergence
14.	Kenya	Uhuru Kenyatta	Jamhuri Day Speech – December 12, 2019	Kiswahili	National unity	Formal convergence with national language	National-Level Convergence
15	Kenya	William Ruto	Inaugural Speech 2022	Kiswahili + Sheng	Populist momentum	Urban youth targeting	Innovative Convergence
16	Kenya	William Ruto	Youth Rally 2023 (Kisii)	Ekegusii	Ethnic appeal	Regional identity assertion	Convergence
17	Kenya	William Ruto	Youth Rally in Kisii (2023)	Ekegusii	Regional youth engagement	Cultural identity appeal	Convergence
18	Kenya	William Ruto	Devolution Conference (2021)	Kiswahili	Institutional reform	Functional clarity	Convergence
19	Kenya	William Ruto	Economic Recovery Address (2022)	Kiswahili	Market-centered populism	Empathy-based rhetoric	Functional Convergence
20	Kenya	William Ruto	National Prayer Day 2024	Kiswahili	Spiritual solidarity	Moral-centred messaging	Tokenism

21	South Africa	Jacob Zuma	State of the Nation 2012	Zulu, Xhosa	Civic trust	Multilingual framing	Convergence
22	South Africa	Jacob Zuma	Heritage Day 2013	Zulu, Sesotho	Cultural remembrance	Inclusive address	Authentic Convergence
23	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	Human Rights Day 2019	Afrikaans, Xhosa	Equality advocacy	Historical alignment	Authentic Convergence
24	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	COVID-19 Speech 2020	isiZulu closing	Crisis unity	Emotive closure	Limited Convergence
25	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	Education Month 2021	Sesotho	Language reform	Cultural empowerment	Authentic Convergence
26	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	Inauguration Address (2019)	isiZulu, Sesotho	Political optimism	Poetic multilingualism	Authentic Convergence
27	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	Gender-Based Violence Speech (2019)	isiZulu, isiXhosa	Feminist mobilisation	Rhetorical urgency	Convergence
28	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	Disability Awareness 2023	isiZulu + SASL recognition	Inclusive citizenship	Legislative-linguistic synergy	Authentic Convergence
29	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	Sharpeville Remembrance 2022	isiZulu	Memorial justice	Cultural identity reinforcement	Convergence
30	South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	Human Rights Day 2024	isiZulu	Belonging & citizenship	Emotional appeal	Authentic Convergence

Discussion

The analysis of thirty presidential speeches from 2010 to 2024 in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa uncovers some interesting patterns in how indigenous languages are used. The results show that the use of these languages isn't the same everywhere; instead, it varies based on the political context, the audience, and the purpose of the communication.

To start, indigenous languages were used more often during campaign rallies, commemorative events, and culturally significant occasions compared to formal speeches focused on policy, like budget announcements or technical briefings. In Nigeria, the use of indigenous expressions was mostly limited to greetings or proverbs during national broadcasts, which seems to indicate a symbolic inclusion rather than a genuine effort to accommodate the language. On the other hand, Kenya

showed a more integrated use of Kiswahili in official addresses, highlighting its established role as a national language. South Africa stood out with its rich multilingualism, as presidents often mixed several indigenous languages in a single speech, especially during important events like the State of the Nation and Heritage Day.

Additionally, the thematic analysis revealed that the use of indigenous languages often revolved around themes of unity, identity, solidarity, and cultural pride. They were rarely used for in-depth discussions about policy, economic matters, or legislative details. This suggests that local languages were mainly employed for emotional and symbolic reasons rather than for serious governance communication.

Finally, the rhetorical analysis pointed out some strategic patterns that align with Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Giles & Ogay, 2007). However, this convergence was often only partial. In many instances, presidents included brief indigenous phrases without altering the overall structure of their speech, indicating that the accommodation was more superficial than substantive. Divergence was particularly noticeable in formal settings where English completely took over. On the other hand, authentic convergence, where indigenous languages were woven in beyond just a few casual greetings was most apparent in South Africa.

In summary, the research places the use of indigenous languages on a spectrum that ranges from mere symbolic gestures to true integration, with variations shaped by national language policies and the political climate (Bamgbose, 2000; Prah, 2009).

Q1. In what contexts and how often are indigenous languages featured in presidential speeches across selected African nations?

The results show that the use of indigenous languages in presidential speeches is more about context than routine. In Nigeria, Kenya, and South

Africa, these languages popped up more during campaign rallies, commemorative events (like Heritage Day and Independence Day), religious celebrations, and youth mobilisation gatherings, rather than in formal governance situations such as budget presentations, security briefings, or technical policy announcements.

In Nigeria, the use was mostly sporadic, often limited to greetings or culturally significant proverbs. Kenya, however, showed a more consistent use of Kiswahili, especially during national celebrations and post-election reconciliation speeches, highlighting its established role as both a national and official language. South Africa stood out with the highest frequency and variety of indigenous language use, often mixing several languages within a single speech.

These trends suggest that the frequency of use is closely tied to significant national moments rather than routine governance activities. This aligns with political discourse studies that suggest language becomes especially important during moments of identity expression and national rituals (Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2009). Therefore, indigenous language use is most prominent when affirming identity serves a political purpose.

Q2. What communicative strategies and intentions drive the presidents' decision to use indigenous languages?

The data highlights three key communicative intentions: 1. Building solidarity and aligning identities, 2. mobilising for elections, and 3. creating a symbolic sense of nationhood.

Presidents often used indigenous languages to bridge social gaps, tap into shared cultural roots, and project authenticity. This approach aligns with what Fairclough (1995) describes as the “conversationalisation” of political discourse, where leaders adopt a more casual or culturally relevant tone to seem more relatable.

During campaigns, the use of indigenous languages seemed to be a strategic move aimed at specific ethnic groups, strengthening political loyalty and emotional connections. In situations of post-conflict or crisis, the choice of language played a role in promoting reconciliation, signaling inclusivity and a sense of belonging.

However, the limited incorporation of indigenous languages in policy discussions suggests that the intent behind this communication is often more emotional than analytical. The use of these languages tends to stir feelings rather than encourage in-depth civic discussions.

Q3. How do these practices relate to the principles of Communication Accommodation Theory?

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) suggests that speakers adjust their language to manage social distance through convergence, divergence, or maintenance (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Giles & Ogay, 2007). The findings show a partial alignment with CAT principles.

We saw examples of convergence when presidents intentionally used local languages to connect with specific audiences. This was particularly evident in South Africa, where the integration of multiple languages indicated genuine accommodation.

On the flip side, many instances reflected what could be called symbolic or superficial convergence like quick greetings or isolated phrases without any real linguistic adaptation. These patterns seem more about managing impressions than true accommodation.

Divergence was also noted, especially in formal settings where English was the dominant language, reinforcing social distance, linguistic norms and institutional authority. While CAT offers a valuable perspective, presidential discourse often finds itself constrained by structural limitations that hinder genuine accommodation.

Q4. Are indigenous languages consistently and systematically utilized in governance, or are they merely used for show and performance?

The evidence suggests that indigenous languages aren't systematically woven into governance communication across the three countries. Instead, their use tends to be situational and largely symbolic.

In South Africa, there's a relatively stronger presence of institutional multilingualism, but even there, indigenous languages are more often found in ceremonial settings rather than in detailed fiscal or legislative discussions. In Nigeria and Kenya, English remains the dominant language in formal governance conversations, reinforcing what Bamgbose (2000) refers to as a postcolonial linguistic hierarchy.

This indicates that the use of indigenous languages often serves a performative role-signaling inclusivity without actually redistributing communicative power. When limited to greetings and emotional expressions, indigenous languages risk being reduced to mere cultural symbols rather than having a substantive impact on policy. So, while some accommodation does happen, it rarely becomes institutionalized in a systematic way across governance areas.

Q5. How do audiences perceive the presidential use of indigenous languages in national communication, and what are the political implications?

Audience perception operates on two levels: symbolic affirmation and critical assessment.

On one hand, using indigenous languages can enhance feelings of authenticity, humility, and cultural respect. In multilingual societies where language is closely tied to identity (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998; Adegbija, 2004), such gestures can deepen emotional connections and bolster political legitimacy.

On the other hand, audiences are becoming more aware of the distinction between symbolic recognition and genuine inclusion. When indigenous languages are missing from policy discussions or institutional communication, their selective use may be interpreted as tokenistic performance rather than structural commitment.

When it comes to politics, using indigenous languages can: Boost electoral engagement, provide a temporary sense of legitimacy, strengthen ethnic political ties, and potentially intensify identity-driven politics if used selectively

This means the political outcomes can be quite mixed. While being inclusive can foster a sense of belonging, selective use might also reinforce divisions based on ethnicity and language.

In the three countries examined, the use of indigenous languages in presidential speeches ranges from genuine communicative efforts to strategic symbolic acts. How much accommodation happens is influenced by national language policies, the political climate, institutional multilingualism, and electoral motivations.

The results indicate that the democratic value of using indigenous languages isn't just about having them present; it's about how well they're integrated, how often they're used, and the depth of the policies supporting them. True accommodation goes beyond mere token gestures and requires a commitment to systematic multilingual governance communication.

Conclusion

By applying Communication Accommodation Theory, we can understand that the language choices in presidential speeches are far from random; they are carefully calculated and reveal deeper socio-political dynamics. While all three countries show some connection to indigenous linguistic identities, South Africa stands out for consistently aligning its language practices with formal multilingual policies. In contrast, Nigeria and

Kenya often fall short, treating indigenous languages more like decorative elements rather than foundational aspects of nation-building.

Recommendations

1. To genuinely embrace multilingualism, policies should be integrated into executive communications across all three countries, highlighting linguistic diversity in governance and public discussions.
2. Presidential speech writing teams would greatly benefit from collaborating with language and communication experts to ensure their language choices are culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate.
3. There's a need to enhance and institutionalise translation and transcription services to make presidential speeches accessible in various indigenous languages.
4. Public engagement platforms, like social media and town halls, should promote multilingual conversations, especially among youth and rural populations.
5. Media organisations should be mandated to relay executive communications in major regional languages to deepen civic inclusivity.

References

- Adegbija, E. (2004). Language policy and planning in Nigeria. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 5(3), 181–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664200408668024>
- Adegoju, A. (2005). Rhetoric in conflict-related discourse: A case study of selected speeches of Olusegun Obasanjo. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 4(2), 223–243. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.4.2.04ade>

- Adegoju, A. (2008). Rhetoric in conflict-related discourse: *A linguistic exploration of newspaper reports of the Niger Delta crisis*. *Nebula*, 5(2), 24–40.
- Akindele, F., & Adegbite, W. (2005). *The sociology and politics of English in Nigeria: An introduction*. Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the nation: The language question in sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Bamgbose, A. (2000). *Language and exclusion: The consequences of language policies in Africa*. Lit Verlag.
- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Edelman, M. (1985). *The symbolic uses of politics (2nd ed.)*. University of Illinois Press.
- Egbokhare, F. O., & Ogunsiji, Y. (2001). Language policy and planning in Nigeria: *Issues and perspectives*. *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 11(1), 1–12.
- Egbokhare, F., & Ogunsiji, Y. (2001). Language policy and planning in Nigeria. *Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 11, 1–12.
- Eze, G. O. M. (2025). Kakistocracy to Afrocentric Governance: Evaluating Lumumba's Critique of African Leadership Failures. *Journal of Exceptional Multi-disciplinary Research*, 2(2), 101-109.
<https://doi.org/10.69739/jemr.v2i2.893>
- Eze, G.O.M. (2026). Politics and Intergenerational Communication: The CAT Applicability. *Journal of Media, Journalism & Mass Communication (JMJMC)*. 2(1). 1-8.
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.54536/jmjmc.v2i1.6444>
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

- Giles, H. (1973). Accent mobility: A model and some data. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 15(2), 87–109.
- Giles, H., & Ogay, T. (2007). Communication accommodation theory. In B. Whaley & W. Samter (Eds.), *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars* (pp. 293–310). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Giles, H., Coupland, N., & Coupland, J. (1991). Contexts of accommodation: Developments in applied sociolinguistics. Cambridge University Press.
- Giles, H., & Ogay, T. (2007). Communication accommodation theory. In B. Whaley & W. Samter (Eds.), *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars* (pp. 293–310). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Giles, H., Coupland, N., & Coupland, J. (1991). Accommodation theory: Communication, context, and consequence. In H. Giles, J. Coupland, & N. Coupland (Eds.), *Contexts of accommodation: Developments in applied sociolinguistics* (pp. 1–68). Cambridge University Press.
- Giles, H. (1973). Accent mobility: A model and some data. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 15(2), 87–105.
- Harwood, J., Giles, H., & Palomares, N. A. (1993). Intergroup communication theories. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 139–160). Sage.
- Heugh, K. (2009). Literacy and bi/multilingual education in Africa: Recovering collective memory and experience. In A. Ouane & C. Glanz (Eds.), *Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: The language factor* (pp. 40–68). UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2015/v14i2a3>
- Ihemere, K. U. (2006). A study of language choice in Nigeria: An interactional sociolinguistic perspective. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 15(1), 90–109.
- Mazrui, A. A., & Mazrui, A. M. (1998). *The power of Babel: Language and governance in the African experience*. James Currey.

- Mesthrie, R. (2005). *Language in South Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mwangi, W. (2017). Political rhetoric and language ideologies in Kenya: Multilingualism or language tokenism? *African Studies*, 76(1), 21–39.
- Njoroge, C. M., & Wambua, T. M. (2021). Sheng as a language of convergence in Kenya's youth communication. *International Journal of Linguistics and Communication*, 9(1), 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.15640/ijlc.v9n1a2>
- Obeng, S. G. (2002). Language and politics: Indirectness in political discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 13(1), 49–83.
- Obonyo, L., & Nyamboga, E. (2018). Language and political mobilization in Kenya. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 10(2), 221–234.
- Opeibi, B. O. (2015). Political discourse, social media and the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria. *Journal of African Elections*, 14(2), 47–74.
- Prah, K. K. (2009). *The language of development and the development of language in contemporary Africa*.
- Ramaphosa, C. (2020, April 9). *COVID-19 National Address*. Government of South Africa.
- Strauss, W., & Howe, N. (1991). *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. William Morrow.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & L. W. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.
- Thompson, L. (2018). Political speech and language ideologies in Africa: Between tokenism and transformation. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30(3), 345–360.
- Tinubu, B. A. (2023). *Unity Day Speech*. Nigerian Presidential Press Office.

Uhuru Kenyatta Presidential Archives. (2019–2021). Selected National Day Addresses.

Webb, V. (2002). Language in South Africa: The role of language in national transformation, reconstruction and development. John Benjamins.

Williams, A., & Nussbaum, J. F. (2001). *Intergenerational communication across the life span*. Routledge

Wodak, R. (2009). *The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual*. Palgrave Macmillan.