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## Navigating Kiswahili language variations existing among speakers from different countries

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**Abstract:** This study explores possible ways of navigating Kiswahili language variations existing among speakers from different countries. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research analysed data from focus group discussions, documentary analysis, and questionnaires. Key findings revealed significant variations in vocabulary (62%) and pronunciation (59%) as major communication barriers, alongside accent differences (44%), dialectal variations (42%), and slang usage (36%). Accommodation was the most common coping strategy (51%). Respondents strongly supported the need for solutions, with 91% advocating for measures to address these variations. The study proposed solutions, including having a standardized Kiswahili teaching syllabus (37%), the establishment of a global Kiswahili language body (20%), and incorporating language variation awareness into curricula (18%). Other suggestions included introducing a common Kiswahili language certification (11%), discouraging the use of slang (8%), and promoting translation and interpretation (4%). The study anticipates numerous benefits that come as a result of addressing these challenges, including enhanced global communication (34%), ease of business (20%), improved access to information (16%), increased integration (10%), and improved education (12%). The research concluded that while Kiswahili language variations present challenges, they also offer opportunities for cultural exchange and linguistic diversity.

**Keywords:** Accommodation, Dialectal variation, International communication, Kiswahili language variations, Navigation, Standardized Kiswahili

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### 1. Introduction

Language is an important tool for shaping societies, facilitating communication, interaction, and fostering integration among diverse communities. Kiswahili, which is one of Africa's most widely spoken languages, has emerged as a core medium of regional and global interaction. Language also serves as an official language of the East African Community (EAC) and, more so, plays a very vital role in facilitating trade, education, and governance. Beyond its regional significance, Kiswahili's significance and use are on the rise, thus making it a transnational language of trade, media, and socialization.

Kiswahili still faces challenges posed by linguistic variations that exist among its speakers across different countries and regions despite its recognition and expansive use. These variations, including differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and usage, always create barriers to seamless communication. These challenges are very common in professional and diplomatic settings, where a clear understanding amongst the parties is essential.

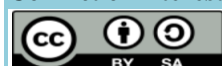
As Kiswahili continues to gain prominence in global discourse, there is a growing need to expand its base. While working in this direction, there is a need to address these linguistic differences. These variations not only hinder seamless communication but also affect the language's ability to function as a tool for regional integration and social cohesion. Kiswahili language variations as a challenge, therefore, need to be examined and solutions to it. This will definitely boost it to be a cross-cultural, language of regional unity and, most importantly, a language supporting international cooperation.

This study therefore investigates the existence of Kiswahili language variations, nature and impact of these variations on communication and integration, and then explores practical strategies that can be employed to navigate this challenge so as to better communication and integration among speakers from different countries.

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Language is a paramount tool used in shaping societies, enhancing communication and integration between individuals, parties, and communities (Mazrui, 1998). Being one of the most widely spoken languages in Africa, Kiswahili has emerged as a pillar of national, regional, and global interaction (Mugane, 2015). Kiswahili language further serves as an official language of the East African Community (EAC) and plays a vital role in facilitating interaction, education, trade, and even governance (East African Community, 2021). Kiswahili's use goes beyond regional significance, and currently it is an international language of trade, media, and socialization (UNESCO, 2021).

Like any other language, Kiswahili faces challenges which are fuelled by linguistic variations that exist among speakers, especially from different countries and even regions, in the face of its recognition and the expansive use (Batibo, 2005). These variations, including vocabulary differences, differences in pronunciation, accent, slang, and dialectal differences, bring about barriers in seamless communication and integration (Abdulaziz, 1989). These variation challenges are very persistent in professional and diplomatic occasions, which require paramount understanding (Mwansoko, 1990).

As Kiswahili language continues to gain more prominence in global discourse, there is a dire need to expand its use. This can only be possible if these challenges are well dealt with because they not only hinder seamless communication but also the language's ability to function as a tool for international integration and cohesion (Mulokozi, 2002). This is therefore the need to carry out this study so as to find ways of navigating these challenges to enhance communication and integration.

## 2. Theoretical review

This study is anchored on three key theories: the Wave Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and Functionalist Theory, which collectively offer a strong framework for understanding Kiswahili language variation across national boundaries. The Wave Theory by Johannes Schmidt (1872) explains language spread from a central origin, with features diminishing as distance increases. This theory helps trace the spread and diversification of Kiswahili and highlights how regional variations develop due to geographical and social factors.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by John Gumperz (1998), explores how speakers adjust their communication styles to accommodate linguistic differences. It is particularly relevant in this study for understanding how Kiswahili speakers from different countries modify their speech to achieve mutual understanding. The Functionalist Theory by Émile Durkheim (1893) emphasizes social cohesion through shared values and language. It supports the idea that while Kiswahili variations exist, they can enhance regional integration and communication if managed effectively. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional perspective on the origins, evolution, and social functions of Kiswahili variations across borders.

## 3. Methodology

This research study utilized an exploratory research design to investigate identified Kiswahili language variations that persist among speakers from different countries. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques for comprehensive data analysis. Data collection tools included Focus Group Discussion and documentary analysis to identify common Kiswahili language variations existing among Kiswahili speakers from different countries, and the use of a questionnaire to verify how these variations affect cross-border communication and integration and the ways of navigating this challenge of Kiswahili language variations.

Purposive sampling technique was employed whereby the Questionnaires targeted 100 Kiswahili speakers with international communication experience, specifically present and former students of Pan African University Institute of Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences (PAUGHSS) from East Africa, using Google Forms for efficient data collection. Focus group discussions involved six participants from five Kiswahili speaking countries (Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo), providing insights into language variations across different countries. Documentary analysis supplemented these findings by reviewing existing studies on Kiswahili language variations; Nassenstein and Baraka (2019), who did a study on Morphological features of Kiswahili youth language (s); *Lugha ya mitaani* (Dar es Salaam/Tanzania), Yabacrane (Goma/DRC), Kindubile (Lubumbashi/DRC) and Sheng (Nairobi/Kenya), where they identified Kiswahili variations.

The second study was Baraka (2019), who conducted a study on 'Analysing ways of speaking Kivu Swahili: Variation and ethnic belonging'. The third study was Miyakazi and Takemura (2019), who did a study on 'Dialectal variation in Swahili-based on the data collected in Zanzibar'. The fourth study was by Colleta (2018), who carried out a study on 'linguistic variations in spoken Kiswahili: a case of form one students from Bungoma East sub-county' and identified some of the variations. The fifth study was by Derek and Hinnebusch (1993), who did a study on 'Bajuni Grammatical Sketch,'. In their study, they identified variations existing between the Bajuni-Swahili speaking community from Northern Kenya and compared it to the Standard Kiswahili. A pilot study and research supervisors validated the effectiveness of these tools, ensuring the research instruments were refined for accuracy and reliability.

Before the research questions were posed to the respondents, their demographic information was collected from them to make sure the data collected was the correct sample, as shown in Table 1 below;

**Table 1:** Demographic data frequencies

	Gender		Age			Status of Kiswahili			Education	
	Female	Male	15–20	21–25	26 +	National	Official	Foreign	Basic	Higher
<b>Count</b>	28	72	1	14	85	60	25	10	6	94

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Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Table 1 above outlines a summary of demographic information provided by respondents prior to answering the core research questions. There were 72% males compared to 28% females. When asked about the status of Kiswahili language in their countries, 60% of the respondents said Kiswahili is their national language, 25% said Kiswahili is their official language, and 10% said that Kiswahili is a foreign language in their countries. Other respondents, 4% said Kiswahili was their lingua Franca, and 1% said Kiswahili was the East African regional Language in their country. These responses signal the right sample because Kiswahili was a core language in their countries. Respondents were also asked about their level of education, and 94% of the respondents had attained higher education (University, college, and technical), and 6% had basic education (Primary and secondary school education). The majority of respondents having higher education is an indication of the respondents' knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, a boost to more accurate responses. Core questions and feedback are explicated in the findings section of this study.

Data presentation and analysis were conducted using diverse tools tailored to each method. Questionnaire data were analysed with Excel and SPSS software, enabling the creation of tables and graphs for clarity. Focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, where key ideas and expressions reflecting Kiswahili variations were identified and coded. Emerging themes included lexical differences, regional pronunciation patterns, and the influence of local languages. Documentary sources were examined using content analysis, highlighting patterns of standard and non-standard usage across official texts. These choices ensured a clear, organized presentation of findings and facilitated interpretation. The methods and tools were carefully selected to align with the study objectives, ensuring ethical considerations such as informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation were upheld throughout the research process. The study's findings led to recommendations for navigating Kiswahili communication and integration challenges arising from Kiswahili language variations.

#### 4. Findings

From the field study carried out on navigating Kiswahili language variations among Kiswahili language speakers from different countries, below are the data presentations from the findings;

##### Existence of Kiswahili language variations among speakers from different countries

Kiswahili language variations are the different forms of Kiswahili that exist among the speakers. These forms may be distinct or sometimes invisible and almost negligible. Using Focus Group Discussion and Documentary Analysis methods, this study carried out investigations on existing Kiswahili language variations among speakers from different countries, and the findings are well explained in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Summary of common Kiswahili language variations among speakers from different countries

Category	Description	Examples
1. Written and Spoken Variations	Written: Differences in printed materials like books, magazines, and currency. Spoken: Variations in vocabulary, pronunciation, and contact-induced changes.	- Kenyan currency written: "Banki" vs. "Benki" on Tanzanian currency. - Spoken: Differences in words during conversations.
2. Vocabulary and Semantic Variations	Differences in words and meanings for common concepts across regions.	- "Bibi" for "wife" in Kenya vs. "grandmother" in Tanzania. - "Watu" (Kenya) vs. "Batu" (DRC) for "people."
3. Phonological/Pronunciation Variations	Variations in sounds due to accents, local languages, or added sounds.	- Tanzanians use /l/ for /r/ ("kula" vs. "kura"). - DRC speakers add sounds: "pigiya" vs. "pigia."
4. Contact-Induced Variations	Influence from other languages like French and English.	- French: "Vrai" (DRC) instead of "Mzuri." - English: "Tulispend" (Kenya) for "we spent."
5. Regional and Ethnic Variations	Localized forms influenced by ethnic languages and dialects.	- Coastal dialects: "Funza" vs. "Chepu" for "jiggers." - Sheng (Kenya), Kindubile (DRC), Lugha ya Mitaani (Tanzania).
6. Youth Language Variations	Innovations in noun classes and non-standard grammar in youth dialects.	- Diminutives: "Ka-" in Sheng but absent in standard Kiswahili. - non-agreeing modifiers in youth languages.

##### Coping with communication and integration challenges

Respondents in the quantitative study were asked to give their opinion on how to cope with communication and integration challenges and they gave their responses as in figure 1 below.

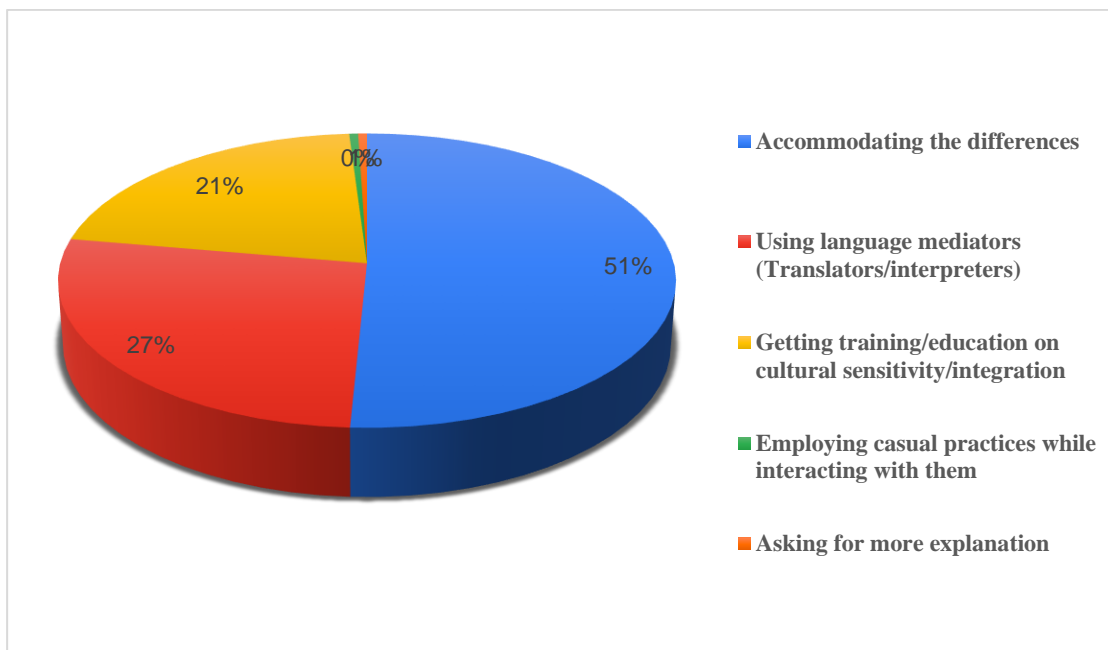


Figure 1: How to cope with Communication and integration challenges

The findings revealed that accommodation is the 51% choice of dealing with communication and integration challenges, followed by using language mediators at 27%, getting training on communication and integration at 21%, and employing casual practices while interacting with them and asking for more explanation each at 1% as elaborated in Figure 1 above.

### How to deal with the challenge of Kiswahili language variations

From the study carried out on the need for coming up with solutions towards the challenge of Kiswahili language variations, respondents gave the following responses as elaborated in Table 3 below;

Table 3: Solutions towards Kiswahili language variations

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	91	91%
No	9	9%

From table 3 above majority of the respondents acclaimed with a yes (91%) on the need to come up with a solution towards the challenge of Kiswahili language variations, against 9 (9%) who didn't see the need for coming up with a solution towards Kiswahili language variations. This affirms the need for the study to look at solutions to this challenge of Kiswahili language variations.

Some of the specific solutions towards the challenge of Kiswahili language variations from the study findings are explained in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Possible solutions towards Kiswahili language variations

Solution	Frequency	Percentage	Description
Standardized Kiswahili Teaching Syllabus	42	37%	Creating a unified teaching syllabus to ensure consistency in teaching standards across different regions.
Establishing a Global Kiswahili Language Body	22	20%	Forming a global organization to oversee Kiswahili's standardization, development, and promotion worldwide.
Incorporating Kiswahili Language Variation in Teaching	19	18%	Acknowledging regional variations and incorporating them into the curriculum to reflect the diversity of Kiswahili speakers.
Common Global Kiswahili Language Certification	12	11%	Introducing a standardized certification system for global proficiency in Kiswahili.
Banning/Discouraging Slang Language Use	9	8%	Promoting the use of standard Kiswahili in formal and professional settings by discouraging slang and non-standard forms.
Adding Value Through Interpretation and Translation	4	4%	Expanding the use of Kiswahili in formal settings, like international conferences, by translating important documents.
Policy on Language in Education	3	3%	Implementing policies that promote Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in schools and educational systems.

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Table 4 above outlines 42 (37%) of the responses suggesting having a standardized Kiswahili teaching pedagogy and methods in the syllabus across all the Kiswahili-speaking countries, 22 (20%) feel there should be a common Kiswahili language global body to cater for its growth and general management. 9 (8%) of the respondents feel it is good for slang/sheng/unofficial Kiswahili languages to be banned in Kiswahili-speaking countries, and 19 (18%) suggested Kiswahili language variation subject of content to be included in syllabus contents across Kiswahili language speaking countries for awareness and knowledge of how to deal with it and 12(11%) of the respondents suggested having a common Kiswahili language certification for all teachers and for visitors visiting Kiswahili language speaking countries. 4 (4%) suggested to have value addition through interpretation and translation in meetings, conferences and reading. 3 (3%) of the respondents were of the opinion that there should be improvement on language policy in education in Kiswahili speaking countries to increase the spread and use of the official Kiswahili language.

**Benefits of dealing with the challenge of Kiswahili language variations**

After asking respondents in table 3 above if there is a need for coming up with solutions towards Kiswahili language variations, 91% of the respondents agreed that there is a need for coming up with solutions to Kiswahili language variations against 9 (9%) who did not see any need for coming up with solution to Kiswahili language variations. The next question was to outline some of the benefits of coming up with Kiswahili language variations, and below are the responses in Figure 2.

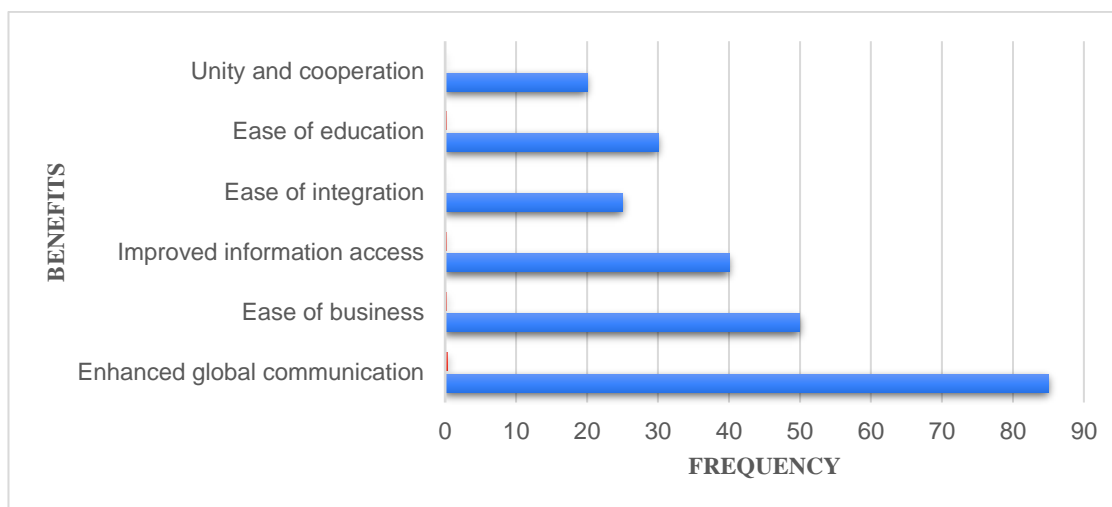


Figure 1: Benefits of coming up with solutions to Kiswahili language variations

Figure 2 above; 34% of the respondents suggested enhanced global communication as a benefit that will come by having a challenge of Kiswahili language variations solved, 20% of the respondents believe there will be ease of business when challenge of Kiswahili language variations is solved, 16% of the respondents believe there will be improved information access. 10% believe that there will be ease of integration, 12% believe there will be ease of education, 8% believe there will be unity and cooperation as a result of the challenge of Kiswahili language variation being solved.

**5. Discussion**

Here is a summarized table on coping with Kiswahili language variations and the benefits of coming up with solutions to Kiswahili language variations.

Table 5: Summary of findings

Data Aspect	Findings	Relevance and application
Challenge of Adaptation	61% of respondents reported experiencing communication challenges due to Kiswahili variations.	Indicates the existence of language-related communication barriers, supporting the need for solutions.
Coping with Communication & Integration Challenges	51% chose accommodation, 21% getting training, 27% language mediators.	Accommodation, training on communication and structured approaches of dealing with variations would help mitigate these challenges of Kiswahili language variations.
Need for Solutions to Kiswahili Variations	91% of respondents agreed on the need for solutions to Kiswahili language variations.	A strong consensus on the necessity of addressing Kiswahili variations through formalized and structured approaches.
Suggested Solutions to Kiswahili Variations	- 37%: Standardized Kiswahili syllabus. - 20%: Global Kiswahili body. - 18%: Variation subject in the syllabus.	There is high support for the solution measures, particularly standardizing the Kiswahili syllabus, educating Kiswahili about the existence of variations, and creating a global body to oversee and assist in Kiswahili language certifications for teachers and visitors.

	- 11%: Common Kiswahili certification.	
Benefits of Solving Kiswahili Variations	34%: Enhanced global communication. 16%: Improved information access. 10%: Ease of integration and unity. 20%: Ease of business. 12%: Ease of education.	Anticipated benefits align with the study objectives, demonstrating broad potential impact.

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

The research data in Table 5 above provides several key findings from the study that can be used to navigate Kiswahili language variations existing among speakers from different countries. The data collected from the respondents reveal significant insights into the challenges and potential solutions for this challenge of Kiswahili language variations. A substantial 61% of the respondents reported facing communication difficulties due to variations in Kiswahili. This pinpoints the communication challenges encountered by speakers from various regions, thus emphasizing the need to implement measures to overcome these communication obstacles.

Effective strategies are needed to navigate these challenges, including standardization of Kiswahili language and curriculum in different countries, and introducing education and awareness of the existence of these Kiswahili language variations in different countries. And Appropriate approaches that can be used to navigate these challenges (51%) identified accommodation as the most effective approach, followed by incorporation of language mediators (27%) and training on cultural sensitivity and integration (21%).

The highest correspondents (91%) agreed with the need to come up with a solution to the challenge of Kiswahili language variations and proposed solutions amongst them, the creation of a standardized syllabus (37%), and coming up with a global Kiswahili language body (20%).

In summary, the positive outcomes of resolving Kiswahili language variations were widely recognized. A large number of respondents believed that addressing these challenges would enhance Kiswahili’s global communication (34%), ease of business (16%), improved access to information (12%), and greater ease of integration and unity (10%). These anticipated benefits further reinforce the study’s objectives, pointing out the impact that resolving Kiswahili variations could have on both the Kiswahili-speaking population and international interactions.

## 6. Contributions of the study

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of Kiswahili, Kiswahili linguistics, communication, and integration. The study provides data-driven facts on the existence of diversity Kiswahili language, highlighting the variations in vocabulary, differences in pronunciation, and the general language use.

The study further offers practical actions that can be applied to address these linguistic differences, including the introduction of a standardized Kiswahili curriculum, the formation of a global Kiswahili language body, and the incorporation of Kiswahili language variations topics in the education curriculum. The suggestions will be of benefit to both the teachers and lecturers, learners, policy-makers and researchers, and linguists who seek to promote the growth of Kiswahili language globally.

It also contributes to the academic discourse on language, linguistics, and integration. It facilitates this by providing a foundation for further research in linguistics, sociolinguistics, African languages, international communication, and integration.

## 7. Implications of the study

The study findings have weighty implications in language policy, education, international communication, and also regional integration fields.

The study examines the need to have structured modalities of addressing Kiswahili language variations from a policy perspective. National, regional, and international language institutions can benefit from these findings and formulate policies that standardize Kiswahili language and at the same time preserve its diversity, which is important in other aspects. A global Kiswahili language body would reinforce this by coordinating and oversight the initiatives.

Advocating for the incorporation of Kiswahili language variation awareness in the education sector in the curricular in different countries will equip learners with diverse knowledge of Kiswahili language, plus the variations and diversities.

Offering training on language variations and communication will likely enhance, improve, and boost international trade and trade relations, diplomacy, and international cooperation through the mitigation of linguistic misunderstandings.

In the study’s recommendations for further study, digital communication platforms and social media online interactions are highlighted as an important aspect of the study related to study. This will bring new knowledge that never existed in these new and emerging modalities of communication.

## 8. Conclusion

Findings of this study point out the impact of Kiswahili language variations on communication and integration among Kiswahili speakers from different countries. Most of the respondents (61%) admitted to having faced difficulties arising

from Kiswahili language variations, which affirmed the need to carry out this study in an effort to find a solution to the problem.

Almost all the respondents (91%) saw the need to address the challenge of Kiswahili language variations. Their recommendations included coming up with a standardized Kiswahili syllabus (37%), establishing a global Kiswahili language body (20%), and also the suggestion to incorporate Kiswahili language variations awareness in the curriculum (18%). Doing this was anticipated to bring about efficiency in global Kiswahili language communication (34%), improved access to information (16%), ease of carrying out business activities (20%), and improved interaction and integration among Kiswahili speakers globally (10%).

To foster a cohesive and integrated Kiswahili-speaking community, the study recommends concerted efforts by Kiswahili language users, policy-making bodies, scholars, and educators. National governments, educational ministries, and language bodies such as BAKITA, BAKIZA, TATAKI, and KAKAMA should work towards addressing Kiswahili variations through standardized teaching pedagogy across Kiswahili-speaking nations, enhancing cross-border communication and integration. Establishing a global Kiswahili language body (above bodies are national and regional aligned) is crucial to complement the existing national and regional entities by addressing the language's internationalization and enforcing common standards. Scholars are encouraged to conduct further research on the impact of Kiswahili variations and regional influences, including youth languages, while educators should emphasize the language's diversity in their teaching to equip learners with the ability to navigate its rich linguistic heritage. These measures will promote effective communication, cultural exchange, and unity across regions.

The research recommends exploring further on the topic and related area by looking at the impact of digital communication platforms, such as social media and messaging apps, on Kiswahili language variations. Investigating how these platforms influence the spread of regional variations and youth languages like Sheng, Lugha ya Mitaani, and Yabacrane is crucial, as they may either foster new forms of Kiswahili or promote standardization through their broad reach. Such studies would provide deeper insights into the evolution and adaptation of Kiswahili in digital contexts, contributing to enhanced communication and integration among speakers across different regions.

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