

Chapter 9

Exploring Language as a Tool of Empowerment: Negotiating Identity and Challenging Dominant Discourses in Activist Movements at Kenyan Universities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the relationship between language, identity, and activism in campus movements. It examines how language is used to construct and negotiate identity within activist communities and intersects with gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other marginalised identities. By analysing activists' linguistic strategies, the chapter shows how language can be a powerful tool for resistance, inclusion, and social change. The research draws on empirical evidence from various disciplines, including sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and social justice studies, to offer insights into how activists strategically use language to challenge dominant discourses and ideologies. It looks at how language can be used to transform activist movements, including reclaiming derogatory language, promoting inclusive terminology, and using language to dismantle oppressive systems and narratives. It offers valuable insights for promoting inclusivity, empowerment, and resistance within activist communities, thereby enriching our understanding of the role of language.

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I. LANGUAGE, POWER, NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN STUDENT ACTIVISM

In recent years, campus activism has gained momentum, with students mobilizing around social justice issues like racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. Language plays a crucial role in these movements, shaping activists' identities and messages. Understanding how language operates within activist communities on college campuses is crucial for identity negotiation and social change. Historically, student activism has been a force for social change, promoting democracy and human rights. Student movements intersect with social justice-oriented knowledge projects, as noted by scholars like Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality. Further, Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) state that intersectionality makes social inequality, power, and social justice more complex. Because of this, language practices intersect with various identity markers and influence activist movements the world over (Mwaura Kiroga (2020).

Deborah Tannen's research focuses on how communication is shaped by factors like gender, power, and context, and how these layers influence interactions. Her work on conversational analysis, particularly in her book "Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work," offers important insights into how individuals use language in different contexts. Tannen's insights can be applied to explore how students use language as a tool for asserting power, forming alliances, and negotiating identity in activism movements. Tannen's conversational analysis concepts include conversational style, power dynamics, and cooperative vs. competitive discourse. Activist groups that emphasize horizontal leadership may adopt more cooperative, inclusive discourse, while more hierarchical groups may reflect competitive, leader-centered communication patterns. Framing and Repetition: One of Tannen's crucial points is the use of framing, where speakers shape how information is understood by others, and repetition, reinforces messages. In student activism, framing is essential in shaping public perception of issues like inequality, governance, or environmentalism. Activists carefully craft slogans and narratives that resonate with their audience. Repetition, such as in chanting slogans or reiterating key points, strengthens the movement's message and fosters a sense of solidarity.

Tannen's work on gendered communication styles provides valuable insights, especially in student activism. Tannen's analysis of how gender stereotypes affect credibility explains why women in activism often need to use different strategies to assert their influence effectively. Additionally, Tannen's examination of indirectness and politeness in language cues is relevant in student activism, particularly when negotiating with authority figures like university administrators. Activists may choose to be indirect or polite in some contexts to maintain dialogue but may become more direct when they believe change is not forthcoming.

In the context of student activism, language is a critical tool for mobilizing individuals, negotiating with authorities, and creating a collective identity. Tannen's conversational analysis can provide a framework for understanding how student activists use language strategically. For example, student leaders may adopt a more authoritative, confrontational style when speaking to administrators but switch to a cooperative style when organizing within their movement. This reflects Tannen's observation that people modify their conversational style based on their audience and social context. Moreover, Tannen's insights on how language reinforces or challenges power structures are vital for analyzing the dynamics of student protests. Activists frequently aim to subvert institutional power by reframing narratives, challenging official discourse, and asserting their linguistic forms (e.g., protest slogans, and chants).

Tannen's conversational analysis offers a powerful lens for understanding student activism and language use. By focusing on how activists use language to negotiate power, build solidarity, and challenge authority, we can gain deeper insights into the linguistic dynamics of activism. Student activists employ a range of conversational strategies, from confrontation to subtle forms of indirect resistance, depending on the context. Understanding these strategies within Tannen's framework can illuminate how language is central to the success of activist movements. One critic has described this as a situation where "difference" is actually "dominance" (Uchida 1992 cited in Tannen 1994). This study will explore how language is used to construct and negotiate identity within activist communities on campus, and how this intersects with gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

Crenshaw (1991) argues that women have united to resist pervasive violence shaping their lives over the past two decades, realizing that mass political demands are more effective than individual pleas. Domestic violence and sexual assault are now recognized as part of a larger system of oppression impacting women as a whole. This awareness mirrors the political movements of African Americans, people of colour, and the LGBTQ+ community. The concept of identity politics conflicts with mainstream views in liberal discourse.

Language plays a role in shaping identity and power dynamics within student activist movements (Nyanchama Okemwa, 2018). Given the foregoing, student activists use diverse linguistic strategies to resist oppression and foster empowerment (Wambui Mwangi (2019). This study provided insights into the linguistic mechanisms through which activists navigate power dynamics and challenge the dominant structures within university settings. Phillips (1998) and Tannen both agree that language can create inequalities through stereotypes and assumptions. This can be seen in media and everyday speech, where words like "lame" or "gay" are used pejoratively. The research examines how language reflects societal biases and provides opportunities for marginalized voices. Adhiambo's (2017) study, "Negotiating Identity and Resistance through Language," explores feminist activism in Kenyan universities. It focuses on how language is used to negotiate identity and resistance, and how feminist activists employ unique linguistic strategies to challenge dominant discourses and empower marginalized voices. Language's value and meaning depend on the speaker within social and cultural practices and power relations. Language is central to defining and regulating social institutions and practices in poststructuralist theory. It involves debates over meanings and the negotiation of identities.

II. CONTEXTUALISING THE PROBLEM

The research highlights the lack of exploration regarding the connection of language, identity, and activism in campus movements within academic literature. It aims to address this gap by examining how language usage in activist groups empowers marginalized voices and challenges prevailing viewpoints. The main inquiries focus on the role of language in shaping identities, the influence of intersectionality on language practices, the strengthening of marginalized voices through linguistic approaches, and the disruption of prevailing viewpoints to promote social justice and fairness within activist movements. The study aims to analyze how language shapes identity in activist communities on college campuses, explore its intersectionality with identity markers, and its impact on activism, examine how language empowers marginalized voices and challenges dominant discourses within activist movements, and investigate its role in fostering social change and equity within campus activism. The research focused on activist movements in Kenyan universities and acknowledges that the findings may not universally apply

to all cultural and linguistic contexts. Given the Kenyan context, the following is a historical overview of student activism within Kenya.

Higher Education in Kenya

Formal education in Kenya was established by missionaries in 1850 and took the form of mainly locally organised initiatives (Bergenthum, 2004, 52). Until the country's political independence in December 1963, the education system was modelled on the British system. At Independence, there were 150 secondary schools and 28,764 students in Kenya (Eshiwani, 1990, 2). In 1986, the state decided that every child should receive elementary education and thus introduced a new education system, the so-called 8-4-4 model, in which eight-year elementary education is followed by four years of secondary and four years of tertiary education (Eshiwani, 1990, 15). The new system, introduced by Minister of Education Ng'eno, extended primary education, increased the need to recruit more teachers and required more classrooms to cover another school year. President Moi became personally involved and organised academics to develop new textbooks. The World Bank helped with the financing and in 1989, adult literacy rates had increased from 20% at the time of independence to 64% (Hornsby, 2012, 124f.). The World Bank encouraged the government in 1988 to implement plans for the so-called 'cost-sharing for education'. As a result, students from poor families left school (Hornsby, 2012, 446ff.). Since 2000, the elementary school has been free of charge and access to secondary schools facilitated. On average, the population had obtained 6.5 years of schooling and was in second position in Africa following Ghana, but the transition from secondary to university education, which was 6.5% in 2010, remained relatively low (World Bank, 2016, 11). Tertiary education served the purpose of educating small groups of elites and was strongly interwoven with politics.

The vision for imperial control involved the creation of a small, malleable class of educated East Africans who would act as the agents and allies of the British in the post-independence era. The plan included the creation of an exclusive regional university for East Africa, the University of East Africa, which would produce an elite class. (Kithinji, 2016, 21f). The oldest and, for a long time, also the only university in Kenya, the UoN, was founded in 1950 as part of the University of London. From the very beginning, the university was of political importance. The direct influence of the state in decisions concerning the university was already evident in its founding, which was itself politically motivated. At the administrative level, there was extensive state influence and control, documented among others in the role of the vice-chancellor, who plays an important and symbolic role in the Anglophone system (Teferra and Altbach, 2004, 29). Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, held this position at the UoN (Oketch, 2004, 120) and directly shaped university policies. Kenyatta's creation of an ethnocratic university leadership at the first national university had important implications for the development of Kikuyu's political and economic patronage. Politically it meant steering the university in specific political directions that supported the state's political agenda. (Munene, 2013, 50). Only the third president of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki (in office between 2002 and 2013), gave up the position as chancellor at all state universities in 2003.

The number of students as well as the working conditions of scholars were determined by the state, which also influenced the research agenda; until 1997, ministers could ban publications in the interest of public order and safety (Bergenthum, 2004, 131–133). According to Hornsby (2012, 448), ethnicity also played an important role, such as in the admission of certain groups of students or in the appointment of university staff. The preferential treatment of specific ethnic groups reflected their political influence (Melchiorre, 2020).

Access to elite positions via university education was more or less guaranteed as long as there were only small numbers of graduates. In the 1960s, students benefitted from financial support and political activism was scarce (Amutabi, 2002, 162). In return, students were committed to work in the public sector for at least three years after graduation. In the 1970s, the education system still served as the 'major recruitment channel to elite status': 'In the competition for the best positions, University College, Nairobi, graduates had an edge over their compatriots returning from abroad, particularly those coming from American or other non-British universities,' wrote McKown (1975, 223).

In the 1980s, additional public universities were established and various colleges were re-evaluated: in 1984, Moi University was founded in the Rift Valley, the home of President Daniel Arap Moi. It was followed by Kenyatta University (KU) in 1985 and Egerton University in 1987. The number of students multiplied in this period (Bergenthum, 2004, 107–109). At the time of independence, there were 571 students, with numbers growing steadily ever since. In 1990, there were already 45,572 students registered (Amutabi, 2003, 138). Their number at the UoN increased from 6,506 in 1986 to approximately 60,000 in 2016 (Luescher 2016, 32). The establishment of private universities contributed further to a rapid increase. Since 1972, Kenya has experienced massive growth in the higher education sector. The conditions for the development of private education in Kenya evolved in the late 1970s and 1980s and intensified in the 1990s. Kenya's higher education sector counts a total of 70 institutions, including 33 public and 37 private institutions. This makes it one of the largest higher education systems in Africa (Munya, Mulinge, and Wawire, 2017).

According to the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), there were 97,107 students enrolled in state and 21,132 students in private universities in the academic year of 2007/2008, while in the academic year of 2012/2013, there were 201,690 students enrolled in state and 37,676 students in private universities. Following the Universities Act No. 42 (of 2012), public universities increased in number from 7 to 22, while private universities increased to 30, resulting in a 35% increase in student enrolment in 2013 (Mwaura, 2015).

Tertiary education changed drastically with the introduction of tuition fees in 1991, which were related to World Bank and IMF policies. Falling state subsidies finally caused universities to introduce the so-called dual-track tuition policy in 1998, allowing self-financed students to be admitted to Module II programmes. This increased the number of students admitted to the university, offering two options for access to higher education: Module I programmes with limited student numbers and performance-related access, and self-paying Module II students. The UoN was the first university in Kenya to introduce these parallel programmes, and by 2002/2003 almost half of all undergraduate students had enrolled in Module II programmes. (von Alvensleben, Bretz, and Blumbach, 2017, 17).

The significant increase in the number of students changed the mechanisms of elite formation and the importance of tertiary education. Access to elite education expanded, but it no longer guaranteed secure social and professional advancement. Unemployment rates among young people, especially those with tertiary education, increased significantly (Zepeda et al. 2013, 266). This situation is – together with the outlined political developments – a partial framework for the understanding of student activism in Kenya. It partly explains, together with the political development of the country, the situation and aspiration of student activism as well as the developments and (political) meaning of student unions.

Political Development and the Role of Student Activism

Student activism (or ‘comrades’ power’) has transformed the history of Kenya (Macharia, [2015](#), 26f). In the 1960s, university students were not involved in politics due to their guaranteed positions in the national establishment. However, after 1970, students began engaging in political action, including protests and confrontations, due to changes in the higher education structure. By assuring their occupational aspirations within a milieu of mental and physical exclusiveness, the educational system imparts a strong predisposition to accept the political world as it is (McKown, [1975](#), 225). The student attitude shifted with political and educational changes, leading to increased political involvement. Student activism peaked in the mid-1970s to mid-1990s, often accompanied by calls for democratic reforms.

During the 1970s and 1980s, student political activism was concerned with deteriorating university conditions and broader social and economic issues, contributing to the attempted military coup d’état in 1982. Students from the UoN openly supported the coup, and some had been involved in its organisation (Nkinyangi, [1991](#), 376). The coup failed, repression continued to increase (Mair, [1998](#), 239–246), the university was closed for more than a year and students were arrested (Nkinyangi, [1991](#), 170). In the wake of the failed coup, the regime became even more restrictive.

In the mid-1980s, aid payments for African states became increasingly politicised. In the course of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), the allocation of funds or loans in connection with political conditions gained importance (Hofmeier, [1990](#)). The manipulated elections of 1988 caused unrest in Kenya. In this context, an unauthorised pro-democracy rally took place in Nairobi on 7 July 1990. The event ended in a dispute with the police and is commonly known as the ‘Saba Saba riots’ (Nasong’o, [2007](#), 38). In the context of historical events, student activism transformed with the founding and dissolution of several student organizations. For example, the Students Organization of Nairobi University (SONU) was banned multiple times by the Kenyatta and Moi governments. During the struggle for multiparty democracy in Kenya, the union supported political opposition leaders and played a significant role in Kenya’s transition to a multiparty state. In 1992, the union was disbanded again, leading to the suspension or expulsion of many student leaders. The absence of SONU left a hole in Kenya’s student movement in the 1990s (Melchiorre, [2020](#)). But Kenyan university students were also politically engaged during this time and remained active in national politics, fighting for constitutional reforms or protesting against the introduction of neoliberal austerity reforms to higher education (Melchiorre, [2020](#), 787). From 1992 onwards, Kenya’s political structures were gradually liberalized, with democratic forces strengthened by criticism from the church, the Law Society of Kenya, state party dissidents, civil society agents, and students.

Although the influence of opponents increased, the authoritarian Moi regime remained in power for quite some time. When the democratisation process was reinforced by both national and international pressure in the late 1990s, however, liberalisation finally took off and political parties resurfaced (Hornsby [2012](#)). External stakeholders, such as international donors, offered support and encouraged the preparations for free elections. The fragmentation of the opposition enabled Moi to be elected for yet another term. In 1997, his party prevailed by a narrow majority (Neubert, [1999](#), 260). Moi’s decision to permit multiparty elections was explained, on the one hand, by his hope to nevertheless remain in power and, on the other hand, by the need to secure the continued flow of international financial aid (Branch and Cheeseman [2008](#)). Student leaders urged the government to lift the ban on SONU. When reinstated in 1998 as SONU 98, elections were held and officials were sworn in. However, SONU’s influence also led to an increase in intra-student violence.

This development went hand in hand with a wider trend in Kenyan politics of the 1990s (Melchiorre, 2020, 792). Since then, the organisation has implemented a structure of student representation and annual elections. Compared to the 1980s and 1990s, the political participation and representation of students has increased (Klopp and Orina, 2002); student leaders have become involved in the decision-making process at the university and formally serve as the link between the student body and university administration, a step that has resulted in a more peaceful climate (Macharia, 2015, 29). The history of student activism at the UoN is largely undocumented in the late-1990s. What is clear, nonetheless, is that Nairobi's student movement and university student leadership began to show signs of collaboration with, and co-optation by, external political forces, both within the ruling party as well as the opposition (Melchiorre, 2020, 782). University students institutionalised representative structures, such as student organisations at different campuses.

Students and Political Elitism

In the 2000s, student representatives used their positions as starting points for political careers (Deutschmann, 2020). Both today's student leaders and their organisations are important for mobilising strikes and protests to emphasise their material, social, and political demands. SONU 98 may be understood as a complex, or formal organization, that identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement its goals' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, 153). The organisation developed and changed its aims and methods in the context of its political environment, adjusting to the changing structure of political opportunities (Eisinger, 1973). Student activism is intertwined with historical and political structures, reflecting the relationship between national and student politics in Kenya. Many former student leaders transition to national politics, showing their commitment to activism as a stepping stone to a political career.

Student politics and campaigning greatly influence national decision-making and resource management. Student leaders at Kenyan universities benefit from their involvement in student politics. For example, a student leader at Kenyatta University described his motivation for holding office in the student organization.

I spent around 70,000 for my campaigns and to me, the benefit is not financial. I benefitted a lot from being in this office and it's purely not financial. I benefitted from the connections you know [...] Socialising, you know, social network [...] Other student leaders, other leaders, national leaders in the corporate world or even in the political world and then with that comes your freedom to attend big seminars in the country where you interact with equally big lions and this changes you [...] that's the biggest benefit you get from such an office. (student leader, Kenyatta University (KU); interview in Nairobi 2013)

Students engaged in student organisations secure various benefits by serving as student leaders. They can meet influential stakeholders, organize events, and participate in leadership training. Their position helps them build a network for their future professional careers and can also be beneficial for their future political careers.

The University of Nairobi, politicians have vested interest because if they want [...] especially members of parliament, if they want to, you know, to make a point, so they use the students who come and barricade the roads and, you know, demonstrate [...] Most often, it's in the interest of a few politicians. So that is why they normally want a person they can influence to be in office. The KU is far from the city centre [...] but we have decided most of the time it's an individual choice. I can't

lie to you. So many politicians have approached me, they want to sell their agenda [...] but me, I say no [...]. (Interview with a student leader from Kenyatta University 2013)

Student organizations represent student interests and help mobilize the student body while also serving as a framework for the qualification and recruitment of future elite members. This explains the institutionalization and professionalization of students' political activism and its connection to national politics. Oanda (2016, 77) also emphasises that student campaigns are often supported by national political parties. Student campaigns are often funded by national political parties with specific interests. Some political leaders support students with genuine intentions to help them start political careers, while others have ulterior motives such as obtaining personal favours from the students. A student leader in 2013 described it thus:

Politicians want to have a foot in the university. [...] Student leaders are useful for mobilisation [...] mostly it takes tribal lines, you know, it is very hard to access leaders from other communities if you are not from their community. (Student leader, interview in Nairobi 2013)

The above text explains the motivation of national politicians to support certain candidates for student leadership, highlighting the role of pre-existing networks and patron-client relationships, often based on ethnicity. It also discusses the dual functions of student organizations as part of social movements and institutionalized parts of the university structure, with an impact on the recruitment of Kenya's political elite.

Munene (2013) states that ethnicity is central to politics in Kenya. Student activism is analyzed about political development, social status, the education system, and ethnic backgrounds of student leaders, all of which are interconnected. Ethnicity has become central to political competition in Kenya after independence, superseding political parties with defined policies and programs (Munene, 2013, 48). This, again, demonstrates the close resemblance between student and national politics. It also points to the relationship between actors from both spheres and highlights the correspondence between the political structures. The politicisation of ethnic structures is a very important factor in Kenya. It is central to the recruitment of political leaders and the mobilisation of constituents, indicating that class structure might not be as relevant as the ethnic or regional origin of the actors.

Based on the historical overview of student activism, understanding the role of language in activism is crucial for advancing social justice initiatives on college campuses and beyond. This research sheds light on how language empowers marginalized voices and challenges dominant discourses, contributing to more inclusive and effective activist strategies. The findings may inform policy interventions and educational initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Linguistic Activism

This study draws on interdisciplinary perspectives from sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and social justice studies. In analyzing student activism and the role of language, several linguistic and critical theories can be applied to understand how language functions as a tool of power, resistance, and identity formation. These include Michel Foucault's theories of discourse and power, M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), and Norman Fairclough's Language and Power through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Below is a brief analysis of each theory within the context of student activism and the role of language.

Foucauldian Theories: Discourse and Power

Michel Foucault's theories focus on the idea that discourse is a tool of power and that power relations are present in language. Foucault sees language as a battleground where power is wielded through the construction of knowledge, norms, and truths. In student activism, Foucault's concept of "discursive formation" suggests that activists' language can challenge or reinforce societal norms and institutional power. Through protests, slogans, and alternative narratives, activists aim to disrupt dominant institutional discourses. Foucault's idea of "biopower" can also be seen in student movements, as activists resist control mechanisms imposed by institutions. They use language to fight against restrictions on free speech and censorship. (Foucault, 1972).

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)

M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) sees language as a social semiotic system with three key functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. This framework helps understand how language is used in student activism: representing reality, constructing relationships, and ensuring coherence. It allows for analyzing language choices and their impact on protest communication, encoding of values, and reflection of broader social dynamics. (Halliday 1978).

Fairclough's Language and Power

Norman Fairclough's work on language and power examines how language operates within social institutions to both produce and challenge power. In the context of student activism, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a framework for examining how activists use language to contest institutional authority. Through CDA, it is possible to study how activists frame their issues and use language to expose injustices or inequalities. Fairclough's analysis emphasizes that language used by activists is never neutral but loaded with ideological meanings that can redefine social relations. (Fairclough, 1989).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Fairclough's CDA is a method of analyzing the relationship between language, ideology, and power. CDA focuses on how discourse structures both reflect and shape social hierarchies. In student activism, CDA can be applied to examine how activists challenge dominant ideologies and the institutional status quo through language. For instance, the analysis of protest speeches, slogans, and manifestos can reveal how activists use linguistic strategies to frame their demands as morally or politically just, thus undermining hegemonic ideologies. Fairclough highlights how language not only represents reality but also shapes it. By analyzing the discourse of both activists and institutions, we can better understand how language is used to exert influence, resist oppression, and mobilize social change. (Fairclough, 1995).

In student activism, language is crucial for expressing grievances, mobilizing supporters, and challenging power structures. The theories of Foucault, Halliday, and Fairclough help us understand how language can be used for control and resistance. They highlight the vital role of language in social movements and activism, which involves both social change and personal transformation. Student activists

must grapple with their privileges and decide how to use them: to advance themselves or to confront and eliminate oppression and destruction.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research used qualitative methods, such as ethnographic research, discourse analysis, interviews, participant observation, and focus groups to explore language use in activist movements in selected Kenyan universities. The target population included students, faculty members, and administrative staff actively involved in addressing social, political, or environmental issues. Purposive sampling was used to select universities known for vibrant activist movements, ensuring diversity in geography and demographics. Snowball sampling was used within each university to identify key informants and participants deeply involved in activist discourse. The inclusion criteria were individuals actively participating in activist movements and willing to engage in interviews or focus group discussions. The exclusion criteria considered individuals not directly involved in activist movements. The total sample size was approximately 50 to 100 participants from selected universities. It included 70% students, 20% faculty members, and 10% administrative staff. The respondents were 35 to 70 student activists (7 to 14 per university), 10 to 20 faculty members involved in activism (2 to 4 per university), and 5 to 10 administrative staff supporting activist movements (1 to 2 per university).

The data collection involved semi-structured interviews with key informants, focus group discussions, document analysis of written materials, and participant observation within activist movements to explore language use, identity negotiation, discourse challenges, and power dynamics. This allowed for the emergence of themes and patterns related to language, identity, and activism. The researchers used thematic and interpretive analysis to identify recurring patterns and linguistic strategies employed by activists. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. However, the findings may be limited to the selected universities and may not represent the broader Kenyan activist landscape due to potential biases in participant self-selection and researcher interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting research on language as a tool of empowerment in the context of activist movements in Kenyan universities, ethical issues were addressed to ensure the protection of participants, the integrity of the research, and the validity of the findings. Below are key ethical considerations this study put in place. The research ensured informed consent, confidentiality, minimized harm, respect for autonomy, cultural sensitivity, transparency, and ethical approval and compliance. These ethical practices were crucial to respecting the agency of activists while contributing valuable insights to the academic understanding of language, empowerment, and activism.

IV. LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND ACTIVISM ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

The language within activist communities on college campuses is more than just a communication tool; it's a fundamental aspect of identity. These communities develop a unique lexicon and discourse that reflect their values, beliefs, and objectives. By innovating linguistically and reclaiming derogatory terms, activists assert their agency and reshape societal narratives, fostering belonging and empowerment. The language used in activist circles is a powerful symbol of collective identity and social change.

i) Language and Identity Within Activist Communities on College Campuses

Students, staff, and faculty agreed that language plays a significant role in defining activism on college campuses.

Table 1. How language constructs and negotiates identity within activist communities on college campuses

	Item	Overall Responses
1.	The role language plays in shaping activism on college campuses.	Language has a significant impact on shaping activism; it serves as a crucial tool for framing issues and mobilizing support.
2.	The extent to which language empowers marginalized voices within activist communities.	Language is crucial in empowering marginalized voices within activist communities; it serves as a tool for advocacy, representation, and mobilization.
3.	Specific language practices that challenge dominant discourse within these communities.	Specific language challenging dominant discourse within activist communities is noticeable and has a significant impact on shifting discourse.
4.	Ways in which language constructs and negotiates identity within activist groups.	Language may inadvertently exclude certain identities within activist groups, leading to feelings of marginalization.
5.	Instances where language has been used as a tool for activism on campus.	Protest Slogans and Chants, Artistic Expression
6.	The extent to which the use of inclusive language affects the effectiveness of activism within these communities.	Fostering Inclusivity, Broadening Support: This broad support strengthens the movement and increases its capacity to enact change.
7.	Perceived barriers or challenges related to language that activist groups face on college campuses.	Misinterpretation and Misrepresentation Language Policing Legal and Institutional Constraints
8.	To what extent can language be leveraged to foster a more inclusive and diverse activist movement on campus?	Creating Inclusive Spaces: Encourage active listening and dialogue that values all voices
9.	Perceived differences in language practices between various activist groups on campus.	Terminology and framing vary among activist groups based on their unique focus and target audience.
10.	The role language should play in future activism efforts within college communities?	Articulating issues, building solidarity, mobilizing support and challenging norms.

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The data analysis revealed that language plays a key role in creating a sense of identity among activists and expressing the needs of marginalized groups. Activists use language to identify themselves and their causes, and it serves as a unifying force reflecting their identities and causes. Language is witnessed as a tool for activism during protests, campaigns, and awareness-raising functions, where slogans and

chants help construct their identity and the causes they stand for. They said that it was common to hear activists being identified by names of world-famous activists such as Martin Luther Jnr, Nelson Mandela, Koigi, Besige, Thatcher, Iron Lady, Bensouda (names of some of the popular activists and other famous world leaders in the US, UK, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda respectively). Such slogans as ‘solidarity forever’ and ‘haki yetu’(we demand our rights) were also identified as some of the common indicators of activists’ language on campus.

The respondents mentioned that graffiti on campus is a significant form of activism and protest against social injustices. They highlighted the challenge of potential misinterpretation or misrepresentation of their messages by campus authorities and those opposed to activism. For example, during the LGBTQ+ debate in Kenya, activists were accused of promoting anti-African social norms, which they clarified was not the case. Campus authorities often use the law to prohibit activist language, labelling it as hate speech. Activists use confrontational language due to authorities' resistance.

All respondents agreed that language should be used to articulate issues, build solidarity, mobilize support, challenge norms, and promote dialogue. They emphasized the use of inclusive language, such as neutral and inclusive pronouns, to reduce marginalization and social injustices. Language plays a pivotal role in constructing identity and shaping activism in Kenya, as evidenced by studies conducted by Nyanchama in 2018, Adhiambo in 2017, and Wambui in 2019.

The focus groups found that specific language and phrases played a key role in shaping the identity of campus activism movements. Terms like “the human rights people,” “the activists,” and “the opinion leaders” served as identity markers and triggered action when injustices occurred. Interviewees noted the use of derogatory terms by campus authorities and their allies, which inspired activists to stand up against social injustice.

The interviewees highlighted effective language strategies for fostering inclusivity and diversity within activism movements. One key strategy involved reclaiming negative references used to describe activism, turning them into positive identifiers. For example, activists used personal narratives to highlight the positive impact of their work, countering common negative perceptions. Reclaiming negative terms related to personal and ethnic characteristics also served to inspire activists into action. The use of inclusive and neutral terminologies helped foster inclusivity and diversity within the activism movements. For instance, the activists deliberately used neutral pronouns which were not marked for gender to accommodate all. The pronoun ‘one’ was cited as a common example which was preferred to ‘he’ or ‘she’. There was also deliberate avoidance of terms which marked one’s physical characteristics such as ‘the disabled, the blind’ or one’s ethnic background. All were referred to as members, partners, or simply activists. Such language use was common across campuses.

ii) Intersectionality of Language With Various Identity Markers and Implications for Activism

All respondents agreed that language, identity, and activism within campus movements are intertwined, influencing each other. Language is used as a tool for communication and expression within these movements, and the same identity markers were observed across students, staff, and faculty members.

Table 2. Intersectionality of Language with various identity markers

	Item	Overall Responses
1.	How the respondents perceive the relationship between language, identity, and activism within campus movements.	Language is crucial for shaping and expressing identities within campus movements, fueling activism through shared values and goals.
2.	How language practices within activist communities contribute to empowering marginalized voices.	Fostering inclusivity, Building solidarity, challenging dominant narratives, mobilizing action and creating cultural change.
3.	specific language strategies or techniques used to challenge dominant discourse within activist groups.	Reappropriation of language, Centering marginalized voices, Intersectional analysis, Language deconstruction, Cultivating inclusive terminology
4.	How language intersects with various identity markers (such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.) within activist movements	Shaping self-perception, reinforcing stereotypes, affirming identity, exclusion and marginalization and facilitating resistance and empowerment
5.	Examples of how language has fostered solidarity and inclusivity within activist communities?	Inclusive terminology, allyship, intersectional analysis, empowering rhetoric, and community-building narratives. Protest chant: "X must go" Solidarity: "Comrades power!" Confrontation: "Bado Mapambano (aluta continua)" Solidarity/protest/inclusivity: "Comrades Tibim! Tiarara!"
6.	Instances where language has unintentionally perpetuated exclusion or marginalisation within activist spaces?	Gender-inclusive language, Eurocentric terminology, tokenizing language, linguistic elitism, and silencing dissenting voices.
7.	Language plays in shaping the effectiveness of activism on college campuses.	Mobilizing support, framing issues, building coalitions, creating awareness and challenging the status quo.
8.	How the academic institutions better support and promote linguistic diversity within activist movements?	Inclusive language policies, Cultural Competency Training, Support for Multilingual Publications, Promotion of Indigenous and Minority Languages, and Collaborative Language Exchange Programs.
9.	Specific linguistic resources or tools that the respondents believed were essential for promoting inclusivity and representation within activism.	Implementing multilingual communication platforms, providing language interpretation and translation services, offering language learning resources, and conducting cultural sensitivity training can facilitate inclusive communication within activist groups on campus.
10.	Areas of inquiry regarding the intersection of language, identity, and activism in the context of college campuses.	Investigate the impact of language policies and practices on the inclusion and representation of linguistic minority groups in campus activism, explore the role of language ideologies and power dynamics in shaping activism on college campuses, assess the representation and visibility of linguistic diversity in campus activism, and investigate the role of language-based activism and advocacy in promoting linguistic rights, social justice, and educational equity on college campuses.

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The data revealed a lot of similarities in language forms and identity markers across different activist movements on campuses in Kenya. Activist leaders used the same nicknames, based on famous activists and human rights defenders, across campuses. Language forms such as "Koigi," "Bensouda," "Mandela," and "Thatcher" were commonly used across movements and campuses. Similarly, the use of similar catchy phrases and expressions was observed across different activist movements and campuses. Such expressions as 'X MUST GO!, SOLIDARITY FOREVER, COMRADES POWER, VIVA COMRADES, BADO MAPAMBANO (The struggle continues), COMRADES TIBIM/ RIAA/TIARARA (be strong

and fiery) were all common to all movements in different campuses. The language used is crucial in shaping and expressing identities within activist movements on campuses. It serves as a tool for inclusivity, protest, and confrontation, rallying activists together and appealing to their emotions to spur them into action. Consistent use of vocabulary implies similar implications for activism across campuses.

The respondents agreed that language empowers marginalized voices by challenging dominant narratives and articulating their feelings and protests against social injustices. Effective language practices make marginalized voices heard and their demands known to the authorities. Some respondents believe that using diplomatic and persuasive language is more effective than confrontational language in activist communities. They cited a case where a marginalized group successfully petitioned campus authorities to respect their day of worship through persuasive communication, rather than confrontational methods. This is a clear demonstration that effective language practices can indeed contribute significantly to cultural change. When asked about language strategies used to challenge dominant discourse in activism, respondents agreed that language is crucial in centring and amplifying marginalized voices. This was achieved through amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals to speak loudly about their plight.

The respondents agreed that narratives representing the struggles of marginalized groups on campus were effective in challenging dominant discourses. For example, they mentioned anti-feminist narratives that blamed female university students for being murdered in love-related matters. These narratives stemmed from a series of murders in Kenya and led to the labelling of female students as careless, money-thirsty, promiscuous, or even prostitutes. Activists responded with slogans urging society to protect and respect the rights of female students, highlighting the oppressive challenges they face on and off campus.

These narratives on how female students suffered silently and were condemned unheard raised new realizations on the oppression such students faced, hence sensitizing the campus communities and the public in general on the social injustice unleashed on female students. Phrases such as ‘ SAY NO TO STDs (sexually transmitted degrees)’, ‘STOP FEMICIDE’, NO FORCED LOVE’, IF THE GIRL CHILD IS SPOILED, WHERE IS THE BOY CHILD WHO SPOILS HER?’ ‘MY BODY MY CHOICE’, ‘SHARING IS CARING’

The respondents noted concerns about injustices faced by students, staff, and faculty, such as unpaid claims, underpayment, termination of contracts, refusal to honour agreements, election rigging, disappearances of activists, arrests, disruptions of demonstrations, and expulsion of student leaders. Language plays a crucial role in challenging dominant discourses perpetuating social injustices, aligning with Kiroga's (2020) study on language intersection with gender, ethnicity, and class in influencing activist efforts.

The analysis revealed that activist groups examined language use to uncover power dynamics and ideologies. Campus authorities associated ethnic prejudices and stereotypes with certain activists to undermine their movements. The respondents emphasized the vital role of language in shaping self-perception and enabling resistance and empowerment. They agreed that language provided a clear understanding of their societal position, helping them perceive themselves and others within the activism movement. Despite diverse backgrounds, the activists united for a common cause, guided by language to comprehend their role in society. Language can also reinforce stereotypes and biases linked to particular identity markers by using negative labels for certain ethnicities.

Stereotypical Language Use

Language: Referent

Political traitors: those whose leaders join political coalitions
Political sell-outs: those whose leaders join political coalitions
Terrorists/bandits: from bandit-prone regions
Arsonists: from tribal clash-prone regions
Political fraudsters: those whose leaders shift political alliances often
Relief food dependants: those from drought-arid and semi-arid regions
Cattle rustlers: those from cattle rustling-prone regions
Politically insignificant: those from minority ethnic communities

These adopted identities gave the respondents a good opportunity to talk against oppressive tendencies such as cattle rustling, terrorism, banditry, and other forms of social injustices, thus using language as a tool for empowerment to castigate and condemn such anti-social practices hence advocating for social change. The argument behind this narrative is *if 'terrorists', 'bandits', and 'cattle rustlers', can be found on college campuses studying or working and working so hard to amplify the voices of the oppressed, then it is clear that the stereotypes perpetuated through language do not hold any water. This then becomes a form of resistance as well as advocacy for social change through language. The respondents emphasised the importance of using neutral and inclusive language to foster solidarity and inclusivity within activist communities, recognising diversity in all aspects of the movements.*

Language for Solidarity and Inclusivity

Language: Function

Abled differently: Empowering rhetoric
Reclaiming lives: Intersectionality
Reforming Lives: Empowering rhetoric
Prevent violence against women: Empowering rhetoric
Cancer Conquerors: Empowering rhetoric
The environment has the right too: Intersectionality
Our fathers lived with the animals: Allyship
We live in the forest with animals: Allyship

The respondents had mixed reactions regarding whether language has been used unintentionally to perpetuate exclusion and marginalization within activist spaces. They agreed that while there are conscious efforts to foster inclusive language use, unintentional usage of exclusive language occurs quite often.

Language, Exclusion, and Marginalization

Language: Function

He/Him: gender exclusivity
Chairman: gender exclusivity
Solidarity forever: exclusion/linguistic elitism/eurocentrism
Comrades power: exclusion/elitism/eurocentrism

No retreat, no surrender: exclusion/elitism/eurocentrism
Viva comrades: exclusion/elitism/eurocentrism
The disabled: tokenization/exclusivity
The marginalized: tokenization
Use of English instead of Kiswahili: elitism/Afrocentricism
You are either with us or against us: silencing dissenting voices
Shape up or ship out: silencing dissenting voices
Mambo yao ni matatu/ you have three choices only: silencing dissenting voices
Tibim/ Riaa/Tiarara: Afrocentricism/exclusion

The usage of gender-insensitive pronouns and vocabulary is heard now and again. It is common to encounter the usage of words such as *Chairman*, *Watchman*, *Actor*, and *he* among others to refer to audiences comprising feminine gender. It is common to hear Eurocentric terminologies such as *Aluta continua*, *Viva comrades*, *Solidarity forever*, *Comrades power*, and *No retreat No surrender* during activism activities across campuses. Such phrases tend to exclude Afrocentric phrases and expressions.

However, it was interesting to note students have a greater tendency to incorporate Afrocentric phrases and expressions during activism activities. This mixture is testimony to a conscious effort to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric expressions. The respondents cited such phrases as *Haki yetu (we demand our rights)*, *Tibim*, *bado mapampano*, and *Tiarara* to illustrate the rising use of Afrocentric vocabulary and expressions in the activism movement. This implies that there is a conscious effort to end this type of exclusion by fusing Eurocentric and Afrocentric terminologies.

The respondents highlighted how tokenizing language in activism can isolate minority or marginalized communities. They also mentioned the use of English over Kiswahili and Eurocentric phrases as forms of exclusion. Additionally, language was noted as a way to silence dissenting voices. The role of language in campus activism includes mobilizing support, framing issues, creating awareness, and challenging the status quo.

Language and Its Effectiveness in Shaping Activism on Campus

Language: Function

X must go: challenge the status quo
It is now or Never: challenging the status quo
Enough is enough: to challenge the status quo
Viva Comrades: building coalitions
Comrades power: building coalitions
Books, not bullets: framing issues
Our bodies, our choice: framing issues
No sexually transmitted degree: framing issues
No health without mental health: creating awareness
Education is a right, not a privilege: creating awareness

Language plays a crucial role in campus activism by mobilizing support, framing issues, creating awareness, forming coalitions, and challenging the status quo. It helps raise awareness and prompt action for resolving issues that impact various campus groups. Language plays a crucial role in framing issues. Activists use language to cast problems in specific perspectives and emphasize their urgency, signalling that immediate action is necessary. Expressions like 'it is now or never' or 'enough is enough' highlight the pressing nature of the matter, indicating that if not addressed promptly, things will go wrong.

The mobilizing of support and framing of issues make it easier for activists to build coalitions across different activism movements across campus communities, create awareness of the different issues raised, and challenge the status quo. All these enable activists to bring about the desired social change. Consequently, language makes it possible for activists to shed light on the various forms of social injustice against minorities and marginalized groups thereby coming up with alternative perspectives geared towards making campus a better place to be in. The respondents strongly agreed that academic institutions should promote linguistic diversity on campus and provide essential linguistic resources to foster inclusivity and representation within activism. The campus authorities also need to provide IT infrastructure, translation and interpretation services, cultural sensitivity training, support for minority languages, and evaluate the impact of language in campus activism movements.

The focus group data revealed that language is crucial for empowering marginalized voices. It provides a means for these groups to express their grievances and appeal to the public's emotions to inspire social change. Activists use language strategies such as metaphors and personal narratives to amplify marginalized voices and challenge dominant discourses to gain public support for the common good. The personal narratives highlighted the experiences of individual activists facing oppression and social injustices, aiming to mobilize the public against oppression using various language techniques and allegories to instil hope in the activism movements.

iii) Language Practices and Empowerment of Marginalized Voices Within Activist Movements on Campuses

Respondents were asked to describe the role of language in empowering marginalized voices within activist movements. Table 3 presents the data from the questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

Table 3. Language Practices and empowerment of marginalised voices

	Item	Overall Responses
1.	The role of language within activist movements on college campuses?	Communication and Mobilization, Identity Formation and Inclusion, rhetorical strategies, education and awareness, and resistance and empowerment.
2.	The extent to which language practices within activist communities empower marginalized voices.	Linguistic representation, cultural affirmation, Community Building, Agency and Self-Expression, Transformative Action.
3.	Language practices that have been effective in challenging dominant discourse within activist movements.	Language practices within activist communities have shifted towards fostering call-in culture rather than call-out culture. Call-in culture emphasizes dialogue, education, and accountability, rather than publicly shaming individuals for mistakes or ignorance. Using Inclusive Pronouns and Language.

continued on following page

Table 3. Continued

	Item	Overall Responses
4.	The extent to which language contributes to shaping the identity and representation of marginalized groups within activist spaces.	In activist spaces, language practices affirm the worth and belonging of marginalized individuals, challenge stereotypes, celebrate cultural resilience, and empower individuals to advocate for their rights with intersectional awareness.
5.	Instances where language has been used to amplify marginalized voices and perspectives within activist communities.	Language has consistently and significantly been used to amplify marginalized voices within activist communities on college campuses.
6.	Challenges activist groups face in utilizing language to challenge dominant discourse and empower marginalized voices.	Activist language and rhetoric can be co-opted by mainstream groups, diluting their radical potential. Challenging dominant discourse with empowering language can provoke a backlash. Activist groups on college campuses may face institutional constraints impacting their ability to use language effectively for social change.
7.	Linguistic strategies or approaches are particularly effective in promoting inclusivity and diversity within activist movements.	Intersectional language, inclusive pronouns and terminology, culturally relevant language, amplification of marginalised voices and promoting a call-in culture encourage dialogue, education, and mutual respect within activist spaces, rather than resorting to call-out tactics that may alienate or shame individuals who are still learning and growing in their understanding of social justice issues.
8.	The relationship between language practices and the overall effectiveness of activism on college campuses.	Language practices play a crucial role in determining the overall effectiveness of activism on college campuses, shaping narratives, building solidarity, and mobilizing support for social justice causes.
9.	Suggestions for improving the representation and empowerment of marginalized voices through language within activist communities.	Education and training, Participatory Decision-Making, language accessibility, Media and Communication Strategies, Intersectional Collaborations:
10.	Key areas that future research should focus on regarding language practices and activism within campus movements.	The impact of language on activist mobilization, intersectionality and linguistic inclusivity, language and institutional change, digital activism and online discourse, and the long-term effects of linguistic activism. Longitudinal studies could explore the long-term effects of linguistic activism within college campuses, including its impact on campus climate, student activism, and broader social movements, to assess the sustainability and efficacy of language-based interventions for promoting social change.

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The students unanimously agreed that language is crucial for communication and mobilization. According to them, language serves as an effective tool for activists to communicate ideas, garner support, and coordinate actions. They emphasized that effective language use made it easier for them to articulate grievances and demands about various student issues.

The staff and faculty emphasize that language serves as a tool for resistance and empowerment. Activists use language to challenge dominant narratives, norms, and institutional policies, employing strategies like storytelling and pronoun usage to influence policy outcomes. Language in campus activism serves multiple purposes, including identity formation, inclusion, education, and awareness raising. Activists use language to express their identity, and values, and bring attention to systemic injustices, even in the face of limitations on free expression.

The respondents agreed that language practices in activism validate the identities of marginalized individuals, offering worth, dignity, and belonging within activist communities. Inclusive and empowering language enables activists to create an environment where marginalized individuals feel valued and heard, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming agency over their own stories and experiences. Language in activism fosters awareness of identity and oppression, recognizing the interconnectedness

of social factors and empowering marginalized individuals. It provides platforms for self-expression, dialogue, and collective action to work toward liberation and systemic change.

The respondents expressed concerns about obstacles to activism from campus administration and institutional constraints. They identified these as major challenges that activist groups encounter. Effective strategies for promoting inclusivity and diversity within activist movements include adopting intersectional language, amplifying marginalized voices, using inclusive pronouns and terminologies, and embracing culturally relevant language. Additionally, fostering a call-in culture, which advocates for dialogue and mutual respect, is considered necessary.

They also mentioned that media and communication strategies play a crucial role in bringing the voices, stories, and experiences of marginalized groups to a wider audience and challenging prevailing narratives. These observations align with Ngetich's (2016) research on Hegemony and Performativity in the language practices of Kenyan university activists. Ngetich's study utilized Fairclough's framework to examine how dominant structures impact language practices within Kenyan university movements. The research also revealed that language was employed to both embody and challenge power dynamics within activist discourse, providing insight into the complexities of resistance and empowerment. The respondents highlighted the need for participatory decision-making that includes marginalized voices and emphasized the importance of forming partnerships with activist groups, community organizations, and academic institutions to amplify marginalized voices across different contexts and movements.

iv) The Role of Language in Fostering Social Change and Equity Within Campus Activism

The interviewees emphasized the importance of language in driving social change within activist movements. They stressed the effectiveness of personal narratives in inspiring action, as well as the use of songs, poems, proverbs, catchy phrases, and slogans to appeal to the public's emotions and shape attitudes toward activist causes.

The interviewees emphasized the importance of using neutral language to promote social change and equity. They strongly agreed that language that reinforces marginalization undermines the progress of activism movements. Using neutral language helps to avoid tokenization and discrimination of marginalized groups. Additionally, they discussed how reclaiming and reinterpreting negative terms used to refer to marginalized communities can boost morale and drive activism efforts despite the challenges they face on campus. The activists interviewed strongly agreed that campus authorities often used sections of the law to restrict the language used in their activities, sometimes misusing laws on 'hate speech' and 'incitement to violence' to silence their views. They also faced victimization through forced disappearances, abductions, arrests, and at times, even murder, as tactics used by authorities to silence them and prevent them from advocating for marginalized groups in society. The interviewees generally agreed that language plays a crucial role as a tool for empowerment in campus activism movements, helping to shape and define identity within the movements and challenging prevailing beliefs to promote social change and equality in society. Effective language use provides activism with a powerful tool for achieving social change.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research underscores the profound role of language in shaping and reflecting identities within activist movements on college campuses. Drawing from sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and social justice studies, it reveals how language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a dynamic force for identity negotiation and resistance. By exploring linguistic strategies such as reclaiming derogatory terms, promoting inclusive terminology and challenging oppressive narratives, activists harness language to empower marginalised voices and challenge existing power structures, moreover, the study highlights the intricate interplay between language, identity and activism, emphasizing the fluid and complex nature of intersectional identities within these contexts. Ultimately, this research illuminates how linguistic practices can drive social change, fostering inclusive environments and advancing movements towards equity and justice.

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