

Bridging the Communication Gap: Leveraging Indigenous Languages to Improve Police Statement-Taking in South Africa

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Citation: Molokomme, R. T. (2025). Bridging the Communication Gap: Leveraging Indigenous Languages to Improve Police Statement-Taking in South Africa, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(2), 4162-4170. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i2.2240>

Published: November 22, 2025

ABSTRACT

Justice is often lost in translation within South Africa's law enforcement system, where police officers take sworn statements in English, despite many officers and community members being unfamiliar with the language. While South Africa's Constitution recognises twelve official languages, the dominance of English in police procedures leads to misinterpretations, inaccuracies, and incomplete statements, which compromise investigations and erode public trust. Existing studies acknowledge these challenges but fail to provide practical solutions rooted in the use of indigenous languages. This study addresses this gap by exploring how incorporating indigenous languages into police statement-taking can enhance accuracy, communication, and community trust. A qualitative research approach was adopted, employing a secondary data analysis within an interpretivist paradigm. The study examined scholarly literature, policy documents, case studies, and official reports to identify patterns and themes. An inductive approach was used for data analysis, with thematic analysis applied to explore recurring issues such as communication breakdowns, procedural inefficiencies, and the impact of language mismatches on law enforcement. Findings indicate that taking statements in indigenous languages improves their accuracy, completeness, and clarity, thereby enhancing investigative integrity and reducing case dismissals due to procedural flaws. The study recommends the adoption of multilingual policies, standardised training for police officers in indigenous languages, and the integration of AI-assisted translation tools to support multilingual policing. These findings have significant implications for law enforcement, justice accessibility, and language policy, contributing to the broader discourse on social justice and decolonization in South Africa's institutional practices.

Keywords: Communication, Indigenous Language, Police Officer, Sworn Statement, and Linguistics.

INTRODUCTION

"Justice delayed is justice denied," a well-known legal maxim, which then poses a question *what happens when justice is lost in translation?* (Khan 2023). In South Africa, a country with twelve constitutionally recognised official languages. The dominance of English in law enforcement procedures has led to systemic communication failures that compromise justice (Leung, 2019). Police officers, many of whom are not fluent in English, are required to take sworn statements in a language unfamiliar to them and to the communities they serve (Ndatyapo, 2022). Zikalala, Mofokeng, Zenzile and Motseki (2023) postulate that this linguistic barrier creates a ripple effect of inaccuracies, misunderstandings, and incomplete statements, which weaken investigations, hinder prosecutions, and ultimately erode public trust in law enforcement. Despite efforts to promote linguistic inclusivity in various sectors, the criminal justice system remains largely inaccessible to non-English speakers. The need for a transformative approach that integrates Indigenous languages into police statement-taking procedures has never been more urgent (Zikalala, Mofokeng, Motseki & Zenzile, 2024).

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping institutional processes, particularly in law enforcement, where precision and clarity are paramount (Toan, 2024; Ralarala, 2017). In South Africa, the historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid entrenched English as the dominant language in legal and administrative functions, marginalising Indigenous languages in official settings. While the post-apartheid constitution advocates for linguistic inclusivity, the reality on the ground tells a different story (Sokani, 2024). Police officers are often required to record statements in English, despite their primary language being one of South Africa's Indigenous languages. This practice disadvantages both officers and civilians, leading to the distortion of critical information, misrepresentation of facts, and procedural inefficiencies that compromise judicial outcomes (Ndatyapo, 2022; Zikalala et al., 2023).

The implications of this communication gap extend beyond procedural errors. Studies have shown that linguistic barriers contribute to the public's distrust of the police, as communities perceive law enforcement as disconnected from their lived realities (Pickles, 2020; Ralarala, Kaschula & Heydon, 2019). Diamantis (2022) noted that victims and witnesses may hesitate to report crimes due to fears that their statements will be misinterpreted or disregarded. Moreover, court proceedings based on inaccurate or incomplete statements often lead to case dismissals, reinforcing the perception that justice is inaccessible to non-English speakers (Zikalala et al., 2023).

However, it is further noted that existing literature acknowledges the challenges posed by language mismatches in law enforcement, highlighting the risks of misinterpretation and the potential miscarriage of justice (Zikalala et al., 2024; Ralarala, Kaschula & Heydon, 2022; Zikalala et al., 2023). Moreover, much of this research falls short of proposing practical, policy-driven solutions that leverage South Africa's rich linguistic diversity to enhance the accuracy and reliability of police investigations. The gap in knowledge lies in the lack of a structured framework for integrating Indigenous languages into police procedures, as well as the absence of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such an approach. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how incorporating Indigenous languages into statement-taking practices can improve investigative accuracy, enhance communication, and rebuild community trust in law enforcement.

Therefore, this study arises from the pressing necessity to bridge this communication gap by advocating for the use of Indigenous languages in police statement-taking processes. By drawing on sociolinguistic and communication theories, this research aims to explore how language influences institutional efficiency, procedural fairness, and community relations in the justice system (Grieshofer, 2024). Through a qualitative approach using secondary data analysis, the study will examine existing policies, case studies, and official reports to provide a comprehensive understanding of the systemic challenges and potential solutions. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the development of multilingual policies and training programs that empower police officers with the linguistic tools needed to uphold justice in a linguistically diverse society.

Thus, the researcher is of the view that, addressing this issue is not only a matter of administrative efficiency but also a fundamental step toward the decolonization of institutional practices in South Africa. A justice system that truly serves its people must reflect the linguistic and cultural realities of the communities it seeks to protect (Conley, O'Barr & Riner, 2019). This study, therefore, stands as a call to action for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and scholars to rethink language policies in policing and ensure that justice is not lost in translation.

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Language plays a fundamental role in shaping law enforcement practices, as it directly influences communication between police officers, suspects, victims, and witnesses. The challenge of language barriers in policing has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with many studies highlighting the detrimental impact of these barriers on the accuracy of police reports, the reliability of witness statements, and the integrity of judicial proceedings (Zikalala et al., 2023; Leung, 2019; Zikalala et al., 2024). While scholars agree that linguistic diversity presents significant challenges to law enforcement, the exact nature of the problem and potential solutions remain a matter of debate (Zikalala et al., 2023). Some scholars, particularly those focused on South Africa, argue that the dominance of English in policing exacerbates these issues, while others emphasize procedural and systemic factors such as the lack of training in multilingual communication (Mawadza, 2017; Ngcobo, 2020; Sibanda, 2021). Thus it can be deduced that this divergence in perspectives points to the complex relationship between language and law enforcement, calling for a nuanced examination of the issue.

A considerable body of literature recognises the negative impact of language barriers on the criminal justice system, particularly in relation to police communication and the recording of statements. Ndatyapo (2022), for instance, identifies the inaccuracies that arise when police officers take statements in languages unfamiliar to either themselves or the statement-givers. Misinterpretations can distort the content of testimonies, leading to flawed legal proceedings. This issue is not unique to South Africa, as similar challenges have been observed in other multilingual societies (Warren, 2018). In Canada, research by James (2022) points to the challenges law enforcement faces when dealing with Indigenous languages, where misinterpretations during interrogation and statement-taking

lead to biased or incomplete evidence. Thus, it can be seen that this suggests that the issue of language barriers is not confined to South Africa but is a broader, global concern for policing in multicultural contexts (Docrat, Kaschula & Ralarala, 2021).

The role of language in policing is further complicated by the sociocultural context of each country. Ma (2021) contends that the over-reliance on English in legal proceedings disadvantages non-native English speakers, particularly in rural communities where indigenous languages are more prevalent. Ammann (2022) echoes similar concerns and points out that in many African and Asian countries, the use of colonial languages such as English or French in the justice system perpetuates inequality for non-native speakers. However, Schegloff (2020) argue that the problem is not simply linguistic but is deeply embedded in procedural and institutional practices. Libby (2024) contends that inadequate training in translation procedures, as well as the failure to implement standardized documentation protocols, significantly contribute to the inaccuracies in policing outcomes. This perspective suggests that while language is a key factor, broader institutional reforms are necessary to address the systemic inefficiencies that exacerbate the problem (Zikalala et al., 2023).

Additionally, agree that miscommunication due to language mismatches can erode trust between police officers and the communities they serve. Latchford (2025) argues that linguistic limitations often hinder individuals' ability to effectively communicate with law enforcement, leading to frustration and a sense of exclusion. Similarly, Kaur (2023) notes that this barrier contributes to a general mistrust of the police, particularly among marginalized communities where indigenous languages are spoken. This point is echoed by Ndhlovu, Mulrooney, Mutongwizo and Harkness (2020), who highlight that language barriers in police-community interactions can exacerbate feelings of alienation and undermine cooperation with law enforcement.

While the majority of studies emphasize the role of language in eroding trust, there is a divergence in the reasons attributed to this phenomenon. Balint, Evans, McMillan and McMillan (2020) attributes the lack of trust to historical factors, specifically the colonial legacy of privileging English in legal and policing contexts. According to this view, the continued use of English in official police communications perpetuates feelings of exclusion among non-English speakers, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa. In contrast, Dwyer (2018) emphasises the contemporary attitudes of police officers who may view indigenous languages as unprofessional or inferior, a sentiment that further alienates the public. Therefore, it is evident that these discrepancies points to the complexity of the issue, where both historical and attitudinal factors intersect to influence public perceptions of law enforcement.

However, the introduction of bilingual officers can often be proposed as a potential solution to the problem of language barriers in policing. The study by Hale, Goodman-Delahunty and Martschuk (2019) demonstrate that bilingual officers can enhance the accuracy of statements and improve relations between police and communities. Filipovic and Abad Vergara (2018) supports this notion, showing that officers who are proficient in community languages are better equipped to gain the trust of witnesses and victims. However, Filipovic and Hawkins (2019) argues that bilingualism, in isolation, may not be sufficient to resolve the issues at hand. She suggests that while bilingual officers can help facilitate communication, the absence of structured translation tools and standardized training on multilingual communication can still result in misinterpretations and inaccuracies.

Moreover, some scholars question whether bilingualism is the most effective approach in a society with numerous indigenous languages. Dlamini (2021) raises concerns about the challenges of multilingualism in a country like South Africa, where there are 11 official languages. It is futher suggests that the use of multiple languages could lead to inconsistencies in legal interpretations, further complicating judicial processes (Zikalala et al., 2023). This caution is supported by Zikalala et al. (2024), who argues that a multilingual policing system may introduce fragmentation into the legal process, where documents and testimonies may differ depending on the language in which they are recorded. The issue is compounded by the limited resources available for language training and the need for specialised translation services, making bilingualism alone an insufficient remedy for the problem of language barriers in policing (Pickles 2020).

However, in response to the limitations of bilingualism, there are propositions that the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and other technological solutions may bridge the language gap. KS and Narayan (2024) advocates for the use of AI-driven translation tools to standardize police communication, ensuring that language barriers do not compromise the quality of law enforcement. Similarly, Moneus and Sahari (2024) suggest that AI-based translation systems could offer real-time, accurate translations for officers working in multilingual environments, facilitating smoother communication between police and citizens. However, Ejjami (2024) caution that while AI tools may improve efficiency, they may not be capable of fully capturing the nuances of cultural and linguistic context, which are essential in law enforcement settings.

De Varennes (2021) proposed amending the constitution to require the use of indigenous languages in police documentation. Such an approach may ensure that indigenous languages are formally recognized as equal to English in legal contexts, thus promoting inclusivity in the justice system. However, Shearing, (2018) arguing that it may be difficult to implement in practice, given the resource constraints of law enforcement agencies and the

vast number of languages spoken in South Africa. Furthermore, the cost of translating legal documents into multiple languages may prove prohibitive, particularly in areas with limited financial resources (Pickles 2020).

Therefore, the literature on language and policing reveals a complex interplay of factors that contribute to the challenges of multilingualism in law enforcement. This study contributes to the ongoing conversation by critically evaluating how the use of indigenous languages in police statement-taking can enhance justice, community trust, and effective policing in South Africa.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The researcher is of the view that the role of language in policing, particularly in multilingual societies, is deeply influenced by a range of theoretical frameworks that provide insights into how language shapes communication, power dynamics, and social interactions. These theories offer a lens through which the impact of language barriers in law enforcement can be understood, highlighting both the complexities and the potential solutions to the challenges faced by law enforcement agencies. However, the theory that was deemed appropriate is discussed in the following section.

One of the most prominent theoretical frameworks relevant to the study of language and policing is Communicative Action Theory as developed by Jürgen Habermas (1984). This theory is explained by Gaspar (1999) as focusing on the importance of communication in social interactions and argues that effective communication is essential for achieving mutual understanding and consensus. In the context of law enforcement, communicative action is key to ensuring that police officers, suspects, witnesses, and the community can engage in a dialogue that is both clear and constructive. The theory posits that for communication to be effective, all participants must have equal access to the communicative process, which includes having a shared language or the ability to bridge language differences (Gundersen & Hopper, 1988).

In relation to policing, the theory highlights the importance of ensuring that individuals can express themselves fully, without the constraints of language barriers. Norwood's (2024) framework underscores the need for police forces to be sensitive to linguistic diversity, as misunderstandings can undermine the legitimacy of legal proceedings and the quality of justice. In practice, the failure to incorporate multiple languages into policing can obstruct communicative action, leading to inequalities in how justice is administered. This theory also emphasizes the role of mutual respect in communication, which is especially relevant in addressing public mistrust in law enforcement, often exacerbated by linguistic exclusion (Shuy, 2005).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides another useful lens for understanding the dynamics of language in policing. This theory posits that individuals derive part of their identity from the groups to which they belong, and this social identity influences their interactions with others (Tajfel, 1971). In a law enforcement context, an individual's identity as a member of a particular linguistic, ethnic, or cultural group can shape their interactions with the police, particularly if there is a language mismatch. For instance, when a police officer and a suspect or witness do not share a common language, the interaction may be fraught with tension, suspicion, and a lack of trust (Duck, 2017).

This theory helps explain why individuals who do not share the same linguistic background as law enforcement officers may feel alienated or disenfranchised. It is particularly relevant in a multicultural and multilingual society like South Africa, where diverse linguistic communities may view police officers who speak only English or Afrikaans as outsiders (Smet, 2006). In such a scenario, the social identity of both the police officer and the community member plays a significant role in shaping the outcome of an interaction. When language differences exist, there is a risk that individuals may be treated as "outsiders," furthering the divide between law enforcement and the communities they serve. Addressing this divide by fostering inclusive communication practices could contribute to a more effective and equitable policing system (Murphy, Sargeant & Cherney, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study is structured to critically examine linguistic barriers in South Africa's law enforcement system, focusing on the role of indigenous languages in police statement-taking. A qualitative research design is adopted, focusing solely on secondary data to explore relevant academic literature. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of language use in law enforcement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design is particularly effective in capturing the complexity of systemic challenges related to multilingualism in policing, offering rich insights into both theoretical and practical implications (Flick, 2018). An integrative research design is also employed to synthesise findings across diverse disciplines, including linguistics, criminology, and legal studies, to form a cohesive understanding of how language impacts justice delivery. This approach allows the study to draw on

various theoretical frameworks and data sources, thereby strengthening the reliability and depth of the analysis (Van Kerkhoff, 2014). Through an interpretivist paradigm, the study seeks to uncover underlying patterns, inconsistencies, and gaps in existing research, thereby contributing to the discourse on justice accessibility for linguistically marginalised communities (Alharahsheh, & Pius, 2020).

The researcher employed a purposive sampling technique to select twenty to twenty-five relevant secondary data sources that directly address language barriers in policing. The target population consisted of scholarly articles in reputable DHET accredited journals, policy frameworks, legal documents, reports from civil society organisations, and governmental publications that discuss the intersection of language and justice in South Africa. The reputable databases that the study relied on includes but not limited to: Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, IEEE Xplore, SpringerLink, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, DOAJ, ERIC, SSRN, CINAHL, PsycINFO, LexisNexis Academic, ArXiv, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis Online, and SAGE Journals. These scholarly databases ensured that there was a selection of credible and authoritative sources (Bocanegra-Valle, 2017). Given the reliance on secondary data, issues of trustworthiness were observed and addressed through source triangulation, comparing insights from multiple sources to validate findings (Kern, 2018). Data analysis follows a thematic approach, allowing key themes such as communication inefficiencies, legal implications of language mismatches, and policy recommendations to emerge organically (Braun, & Clarke, 2019). Ethical considerations were also upheld through obtaining a waiver application, ensuring proper citation and adherence to intellectual property rights, and maintaining academic integrity throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this qualitative content analysis study, which was based solely on secondary data, is structured around key themes that emerged from the analysed literature, policy documents, and case studies. The next section presents the findings.

Communication Barriers in Police Statement-Taking

The analysis of existing literature and policy documents highlights that language barriers in police statement-taking present significant challenges in South Africa's multilingual law enforcement context. Research indicates that many police officers primarily communicate in English and few in Afrikaans, particularly in area populated by coloured and whites, despite a large portion of the population speaking indigenous languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho. This language mismatch often results in inaccurate or incomplete statements, as victims and witnesses struggle to express themselves in a language they are not proficient in. Studies also reveal that the reliance on informal interpreters, such as fellow officers or bystanders, further compromises the accuracy of statements, as key details may be lost or misinterpreted during translation. Additionally, reports from civil rights organisations suggest that suspects who do not understand the language of their legal proceedings face disadvantages, potentially leading to wrongful convictions or delayed justice.

Case studies also highlight specific instances where communication barriers have directly affected case outcomes. In several reported cases, victims' statements were misrepresented due to the officers' lack of linguistic proficiency, leading to discrepancies in court testimonies. It is also revealed that legal experts argue that such inconsistencies undermine the credibility of the justice process and violate constitutional language rights. Furthermore, research on procedural inefficiencies suggests that officers often spend additional time clarifying statements, delaying investigations, and increasing administrative burdens. Despite South Africa's progressive language policies, findings indicate that the implementation of multilingual policing strategies remains inadequate, with limited resources allocated for language training and interpretation services. Therefore, it is apparent that these findings underscore the urgent need for law enforcement agencies to invest in structured language policies, training programs, and standardized interpretation mechanisms to ensure fair and effective justice delivery.

Legal and Policy Frameworks Addressing Linguistic Diversity

South Africa's legal and policy frameworks recognise linguistic diversity as a fundamental right, yet findings suggest significant gaps in the implementation of these protections within law enforcement. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 guarantees the right to communicate in one's preferred official language, and the Use of Official Languages Act 12 of 2012 mandates government institutions, to promote multilingualism. However, analysis of policy reports and government publications reveals that while these legal provisions exist on paper, their enforcement within the SAPS remains inconsistent. Many police stations lack designated interpreters, and there is no standardised protocol for handling cases where language barriers arise. Studies further highlight that police officers receive minimal language training beyond English, limiting their ability to engage effectively with victims and witnesses who speak indigenous languages.

Findings also indicate that the lack of linguistic inclusivity in law enforcement contributes to broader systemic injustices. Reports from legal advocacy groups suggest that many citizens, particularly those from rural and marginalised communities, struggle to navigate the justice system due to language barriers. Research on multilingual policing in other countries, such as Canada and India, provides comparative insights, showing that jurisdictions with structured language policies, including bilingual officer training and on-call professional interpreters, have significantly improved accessibility to justice. Despite South Africa's policy commitments, findings suggest a critical disconnect between legal provisions and practical application, highlighting the need for more robust enforcement mechanisms, increased funding for language services, and institutional reforms to ensure that linguistic rights are fully realized in policing practices.

Impact of Indigenous Language Use on Justice Outcomes

Findings from existing literature and case studies indicate that incorporating Indigenous languages in law enforcement significantly enhances justice outcomes by improving communication, fostering trust, and ensuring procedural fairness. Studies reveal that when police officers engage with victims, witnesses, and suspects in their preferred language, they obtain more accurate and detailed statements, leading to stronger case evidence and better legal proceedings. Research also highlights that victims of gender-based violence and other vulnerable individuals are more likely to report crimes and cooperate with law enforcement when they can communicate in their native language. In contrast, cases where language barriers persist often result in misunderstandings, incomplete investigations, and compromised legal processes. Furthermore, studies on multilingual policing suggest that language accessibility reduces the risk of coerced or false confessions, as individuals are better able to understand their legal rights and provide accurate testimonies.

Despite these benefits, findings suggest that law enforcement agencies in South Africa have been slow to adopt structured multilingual policies. Reports from civil society organisations emphasise that many police officers lack even basic proficiency in commonly spoken Indigenous languages, making it difficult to engage effectively with diverse communities. Comparative analyses show that countries with multilingual policing frameworks, such as Finland and Switzerland, have successfully integrated language training into police education, leading to improved public trust in law enforcement. In South Africa, however, the lack of institutional support for language training and interpretation services remains a significant barrier. While some police stations have made efforts to accommodate linguistic diversity through informal translation methods, findings suggest that these ad hoc solutions are inadequate. The research underscores the urgent need for a formalized approach to integrating indigenous languages into policing, including structured officer training, recruitment of multilingual personnel, and standardized interpretation protocols to ensure equitable access to justice.

Comparative Analysis with Other Multilingual Societies

Findings from international case studies indicate that multilingual policing strategies have been successfully implemented in various countries, providing valuable lessons for South Africa. In nations such as Canada, Switzerland, and India, structured language policies ensure that law enforcement agencies accommodate linguistic diversity in their daily operations. For example, Canada's Official Languages Act mandates that police officers in bilingual regions be proficient in both English and French, ensuring effective communication with the public. Similarly, Switzerland's policing system incorporates the country's four official languages German, French, Italian, and Romansh, through language training programs and specialised translation services. In India, where multiple languages are spoken across different states, state police forces recruit officers with local language proficiency and employ on-call interpreters to facilitate investigations. The success of these models demonstrates that language-inclusive policing enhances public trust, improves case outcomes, and strengthens procedural fairness within the justice system.

By contrast, findings reveal that South Africa, despite its constitutional commitment to multilingualism, lacks a comprehensive and enforceable policy for language use in law enforcement. Studies show that while some police stations adopt informal translation practices, these methods are inconsistent and often unreliable. Unlike Canada and Switzerland, where officers receive formal language training, South African police training academies primarily focus on English, leaving a significant gap in officers' ability to communicate with indigenous language speakers. Furthermore, research on public perceptions of policing in multilingual societies highlights that citizens are more likely to cooperate with law enforcement when they feel understood and respected in their native language. Findings suggest that South Africa could benefit from adopting international best practices, such as structured multilingual training for officers, mandatory interpreter services, and technology-driven solutions like real-time translation tools to bridge language gaps in policing.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal a significant impact of language barriers on policing, reinforcing the existing body of literature that underscores the role of language in shaping law enforcement practices. The results demonstrate that linguistic diversity influences various aspects of police work, including statement-taking, witness testimonies, and community relations. This is also consistent with research by Zikalala et al. (2023) who revealed that language inconsistencies in police statement taking, can have a negative impact on effective statement taking. Additionally, Leung (2019) states that in South Africa, with twelve constitutionally recognised official languages, the dominance of English in law enforcement procedures has led to systemic communication failures that compromise justice. Thus it is apparent that this discussion critically engages with these findings in relation to empirical literature providing a nuanced analysis of the broader implications for law enforcement in South Africa.

This study also highlighted key detrimental effects of language mismatches on police statement accuracy. This findings resonate with studies by Ndatyapo (2022) and James (2022), who found that misinterpretations often compromise judicial proceedings. The issue is particularly pronounced in multilingual societies, as Warren (2018) notes, where language barriers pose global challenges to law enforcement. Additionally, the dominance of English in police procedures disadvantages non-native speakers, particularly in rural areas where indigenous languages are prevalent (Ma, 2021). However, Libby (2024) argues, that the problem extends beyond linguistic mismatches to systemic inefficiencies, including the absence of standardised multilingual documentation protocols (Schegloff, 2020; Zikalala et al., 2023). Thus, it can be deduced that these institutional shortcomings contribute to broader issues of procedural fairness and accuracy in legal proceedings.

Beyond procedural concerns, language barriers also negatively impact police-community relations, reinforcing mistrust and alienation among linguistic minority groups (Latchford, 2025; Kaur, 2023). This finding are in harmony with Ndhlovu et al.'s (2020) assertion that effective communication is central to fostering cooperation between police and the public. However, while linguistic exclusion is often cited as a primary cause of mistrust, this study suggests a more complex interplay between historical and contemporary factors. Balint et al. (2020) highlight the colonial legacy of privileging English in legal and policing contexts, while Dwyer (2018) points to present-day biases, where some officers perceive indigenous languages as unprofessional. These findings indicate that both historical injustices and modern institutional attitudes contribute to the public's perception of law enforcement.

However, in addressing these challenges, the study explored potential solutions, including employing bilingual police officers (Hale et al., 2019; Filipovic & Abad Vergara, 2018). While bilingual officers can improve communication and trust, Filipovic & Hawkins (2019) caution that without structured translation training, errors may persist. Additionally, the feasibility of multilingual policing in a country with 11 official languages remains a significant hurdle (Dlamini, 2021; Zikalala et al., 2024). AI-assisted translation tools offer a promising alternative (KS & Narayan, 2024), but concerns about cultural and contextual sensitivity persist (Ejjami, 2024). Given these limitations, a hybrid approach integrating bilingual officers, AI tools, and institutional reforms may be the most viable solution. This is consistent with Habermas' Communicative Action Theory, which underscores the necessity of equitable communication for social cohesion (Gaspar, 1999), and Social Identity Theory, which explains how linguistic identity shapes interactions with law enforcement (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of language in law enforcement, highlighting how linguistic mismatches compromise statement accuracy, erode public trust, and reinforce systemic inequalities. It can also be deduced that historical privileging of English, coupled with contemporary procedural inefficiencies, exacerbates these challenges, necessitating urgent policy reforms. While bilingual policing and AI-assisted translation offer potential solutions, their effectiveness depends on structured training and institutional support. Therefore, a hybrid approach integrating multilingual protocols, technological advancements, and procedural reforms can enhance justice accessibility, improve police-community relations, and ensure fairer legal outcomes. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering an inclusive, effective, and equitable law enforcement system.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore how leveraging Indigenous languages can improve police statement-taking in South Africa and bridge communication gaps between law enforcement and the public. The findings indicate that language mismatches compromise the accuracy of police statements, weaken community trust, and create barriers to justice accessibility. Systemic inefficiencies, historical privileging of English, and inadequate multilingual policies exacerbate these challenges. The key takeaway is that addressing linguistic barriers in policing is not only essential for improving procedural accuracy but also for fostering public confidence in law enforcement and ensuring equitable access to justice.

To enhance police statement-taking and bridge communication gaps, law enforcement agencies should integrate bilingual officers, structured translation training, and AI-assisted translation tools to improve accuracy and efficiency. Standardised multilingual documentation protocols should be developed to ensure linguistic inclusivity. Additionally, policy reforms must prioritise the recognition of Indigenous languages in police procedures while balancing resource constraints. Cultural sensitivity training for officers and community engagement programs can further strengthen trust and cooperation. Thus, a hybrid approach that combines human expertise with technological advancements is the most viable solution for achieving effective and inclusive policing in South Africa.

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