

Language Preferences in Radio Listening: Swahili, Vernacular, And English in Kenya's Multilingual Mediascape

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Abstract

Kenya's radio broadcasting environment operates within one of the most linguistically diverse nations in Africa, where over 60 distinct languages coexist alongside the official languages of Swahili and English. This study examines language preferences in radio listenership across Kenya, drawing on nationally representative audience measurement data from the Communication Authority of Kenya's *Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report* (April 2026). The analysis reveals that Swahili dominates radio consumption nationally, accounting for 60% of listenership, followed by vernacular languages at 39%, while English remains a niche preference at just 10% (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17). However, these aggregate figures mask significant demographic and regional variations. Vernacular radio maintains its strongest following among female listeners, rural populations, and lower socioeconomic groups, while English-language radio is concentrated among urban, higher-income audiences, particularly in Nairobi where it captures 26% of listenership (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, pp. 16-17). Regionally, Swahili reaches its highest penetration in North Eastern (88%) and Western (88%), while vernacular languages dominate in Lake (59%) and Central (53%) regions (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17). The study argues that language preferences in radio listening reflect intersecting dynamics of cultural identity, socioeconomic stratification, infrastructure, and language policy. These findings have significant implications for broadcasters, language policymakers, and cultural heritage practitioners seeking to navigate Kenya's complex multilingual mediascape. The study contributes to sociolinguistics, media linguistics, and language policy scholarship by providing empirical evidence on the spatial and demographic dimensions of radio language preferences in a multilingual African context.

Keywords: *radio listenership, language preferences, Swahili, vernacular languages, English, Kenya, sociolinguistics, media linguistics, language policy, multilingualism*

1. Introduction

Kenya stands as one of the most linguistically diverse nations in Africa, home to over 60 distinct languages belonging to the Bantu, Nilotic, and Cushitic language families, alongside the official languages of Swahili (Kiswahili) and English (Mbaabu, 1996). This linguistic diversity is not merely a demographic fact but a living, dynamic reality that shapes everyday communication, cultural identity, and media consumption. Nowhere is this more evident than in Kenya's radio broadcasting sector, which operates with over 200 stations broadcasting in a mix of national and vernacular languages, ensuring "deep cultural resonance and extensive reach across urban and rural populations" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 5).

Radio remains the most pervasive medium in Kenya, reaching 74% of the population nationally, with listenership exceeding 80% in rural regions such as Rift Valley, Lower Eastern, and Lake (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 9). This remarkable reach makes radio a critical site for understanding how language functions in contemporary Kenyan society, not merely as a tool for communication but as a marker of identity, a vehicle for cultural preservation, and a site of contestation over national belonging and social status.

The language choices made by radio broadcasters and listeners are never neutral. They reflect and reproduce broader social hierarchies, including the historical dominance of English as the language of elite education and governance, the symbolic and practical significance of Swahili as a national language, and the deep cultural

resonance of vernacular languages that connect listeners to their ethnic communities and heritage. As scholars have observed, "media organizations in radio broadcasting are gradually fine-tuning to accommodate multilingual socio-cultural identities" (Mudzanani & Mathe, 2025, p. 1), yet the accommodations made are often partial and uneven, reflecting the power dynamics that shape language use in the public sphere.

This study examines language preferences in radio listening across Kenya, drawing on nationally representative audience measurement data from the Communication Authority of Kenya's *Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report* (April 2026). The analysis addresses three research questions:

RQ1: What are the overall language preferences in radio listening in Kenya, and how do they vary by gender, setting (rural/urban), and socioeconomic status (LSM)?

RQ2: What are the regional variations in radio language preferences across Kenya's eight topographical regions, and what patterns emerge?

RQ3: What factors, cultural identity, socioeconomic status, infrastructure, or language policy best explain the observed patterns in radio language preferences?

The study contributes to scholarship in sociolinguistics, media linguistics, and language policy by providing empirical evidence on the spatial and demographic dimensions of radio language preferences in a multilingual African context. By doing so, it offers insights that are relevant not only to academic understanding but also to the practical challenges faced by broadcasters, language policymakers, and cultural heritage practitioners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Policy and Media in Kenya

Kenya's language policy has been shaped by its colonial history and post-colonial nation-building project. The 2010 Constitution recognizes Swahili and English as official languages, with Swahili designated as the national language (Republic of Kenya, 2010). This dual official status reflects a compromise between the practical demands of international communication and governance (English) and the symbolic and integrative functions of an indigenous African language (Swahili).

However, the relationship between language policy and media practice has been complex and contested. As scholars have documented, "a national media policy, that favors the use of Kiswahili and other local languages in broadcasting, would not only safeguard the cultural and linguistic interests of the country, but also have a positive impact on the broader societal goals of national unity and identity, and modernization" (Mbaabu, 1996, p. 18). Yet successive governments have struggled to implement coherent language policies in the media sector, resulting in a hybrid landscape where English, Swahili, and vernacular languages coexist in complex and sometimes tension-filled ways.

The liberalization of Kenya's media sector in the 1990s and early 2000s accelerated this linguistic hybridity. The proliferation of private radio stations created new spaces for vernacular broadcasting, with stations targeting specific ethnic communities through indigenous language programming (Mudzanani & Mathe, 2025). As one study notes, "Kenya has over 158 radio stations broadcasting in indigenous languages. In early 2000, the country experienced the proliferation of private radio stations" (Springer, 2025, p. 2). This proliferation has been described as both empowering and fragmenting: empowering because it gives voice to previously marginalized communities; fragmenting because it can reinforce ethnic divisions and undermine national cohesion.

2.2 Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Radio Language Preferences

Sociolinguistic scholarship has long recognized the intimate relationship between language choice and social identity. In multilingual societies, language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a marker of group membership, social status, and cultural belonging. As Fishman (1972) argued, language choice is shaped by "domain" considerations—the social contexts in which communication occurs—as well as by the relative

prestige and symbolic value attached to different languages.

In the African context, radio presents a particularly rich site for examining these dynamics. Radio is "the most used medium of communication in Africa, reflective of grassroots social identities" (Mudzanani & Mathe, 2025, p. 3). Its accessibility, affordability, and oral nature make it uniquely suited to linguistically diverse populations, many of whom have limited literacy in written languages. Radio also operates in intimate, domestic spaces, creating a sense of personal connection between broadcasters and listeners that is less characteristic of other media.

Research from other African contexts provides comparative insights. A study of Yoruba-language radio in Nigeria found "a strong preference for Yoruba-language programmes over English-language alternatives, with cultural connection (36.2%) and ease of understanding (34.2%) cited as primary reasons" (Umuji et al., 2025, p. 120). Similarly, research in South Africa has highlighted "the impact of English's dominance on indigenous languages, particularly in radio advertising" (Setswana Radio Commercials Study, 2024, p. 1), while also demonstrating that "familiarity with a language fosters brand trust and credibility" (p. 1). These findings suggest that language preferences in radio listening are driven by a combination of cultural affinity, comprehensibility, and social identification.

2.3 Vernacular Radio and Cultural Preservation

Vernacular radio has emerged as a significant force for cultural preservation and revitalization across Africa. By broadcasting in indigenous languages, vernacular stations provide a platform for "cultural participation and the representation of minority language speakers in a contested public sphere" (Routledge, 2025, p. 1). They also play a crucial role in maintaining intergenerational transmission of language and culture, particularly in contexts where younger generations are increasingly fluent in dominant languages.

In Kenya, vernacular radio stations such as Inooro FM (Kikuyu), Kass FM (Kalenjin), and Ramogi FM (Luo) have developed substantial audiences by catering to specific ethnic communities. Research has found that "the youth audience in Kinangop district had a marked preference for radio broadcasts that were in their vernacular Gikuyu language" (Daystar University, 2024, p. 1). This preference reflects not only linguistic comprehensibility but also a sense of cultural connection and identity affirmation.

However, the relationship between vernacular radio and cultural preservation is not straightforward. Critics have argued that vernacular broadcasting can reinforce ethnic divisions and undermine national cohesion (Mudzanani & Mathe, 2025). Others have noted that vernacular stations often prioritize commercially viable languages, marginalizing smaller or less economically significant linguistic communities (Routledge, 2025). These tensions highlight the complex politics of language in Kenya's media landscape.

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Language Policy, Sociolinguistics, and Media Linguistics

This study is anchored in three intersecting theoretical frameworks: language policy, sociolinguistics, and media linguistics.

Language policy, as theorized by Spolsky (2004) and Shohamy (2006), examines how language practices are shaped by formal policies, informal norms, and ideological commitments. In the Kenyan context, language policy provides the macro-level framework within which radio broadcasters and listeners make language choices. The constitutional recognition of Swahili and English, alongside the absence of a coherent policy on vernacular broadcasting, creates a permissive environment in which market forces and cultural dynamics shape language preferences.

Sociolinguistics, particularly the work of Fishman (1972) and later scholars, provides the conceptual tools for understanding how language choice is shaped by social identities, group memberships, and status hierarchies. Sociolinguistic perspectives highlight the ways in which radio language preferences reflect and reproduce broader patterns of social stratification, including gender, class, and urban-rural divides.

Media linguistics, as articulated by scholars such as Fairclough (1995) and Jucker (2006), examines how language functions in media contexts, paying particular attention to the relationship between linguistic choices and audience engagement. Media linguistics provides insights into how broadcasters construct audience relationships through language, and how audiences interpret and respond to linguistic choices.

Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex dynamics of language preferences in Kenyan radio listenership. They enable analysis of how macro-level language policies, meso-level institutional practices, and micro-level individual choices intersect to produce the patterns observed in the data.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Source

This study draws on secondary data from the *Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report* (April 2026), published by the Communication Authority of Kenya. The report presents findings from a nationally representative survey of media consumption patterns across Kenya, conducted across four quarters (Q4 2024/25 through Q3 2025/26). The survey employs a multi-stage stratified random sampling design, with sample sizes sufficient to generate reliable estimates at the national, regional, and demographic levels.

The analysis focuses specifically on radio listenership data, including:

Radio listenership demographics: Gender, age group, setting (rural/urban), Living Standards Measure (LSM), and topography (region)

Radio genre preference: The most preferred radio genres, with news and current affairs dominating at 46.7%

Radio listenership language: Language preferences for radio listening, disaggregated by gender, setting, LSM, and topography

The LSM is a composite measure of socioeconomic status widely used in African market research, incorporating variables such as household assets, income, and education. LSM categories range from 1 (lowest) to 12+ (highest) (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026).

3.2 Analytical Approach

This study employs descriptive statistical analysis to examine language preferences in radio listening across demographic and regional categories. The analysis focuses on:

National language preferences: Overall distribution of radio listenership across Swahili, vernacular, and English languages.

Demographic variations: Disaggregating language preferences by gender, setting (rural/urban), and LSM to identify patterns of variation.

Regional variations: Examining language preferences across Kenya's eight topographical regions (Central, Coast, Lake, Lower Eastern, Nairobi, North Eastern, North Western, Rift Valley, South Nyanza) to identify geographic patterns and anomalies.

Data are presented in tabular and graphical form, with key findings interpreted through the theoretical lenses of language policy, sociolinguistics, and media linguistics.

3.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, as a secondary analysis of existing data, it is constrained by the variables and categories defined in the original survey. Second, the data are cross-sectional, limiting causal inference.

Third, the language preference measure is based on self-report and may not capture the full complexity of listeners' linguistic practices, including code-switching and multilingual listening. Fourth, the regional categorization (eight regions) may obscure important sub-regional variations. Despite these limitations, the data provide a robust and nationally representative picture of radio language preferences in Kenya.

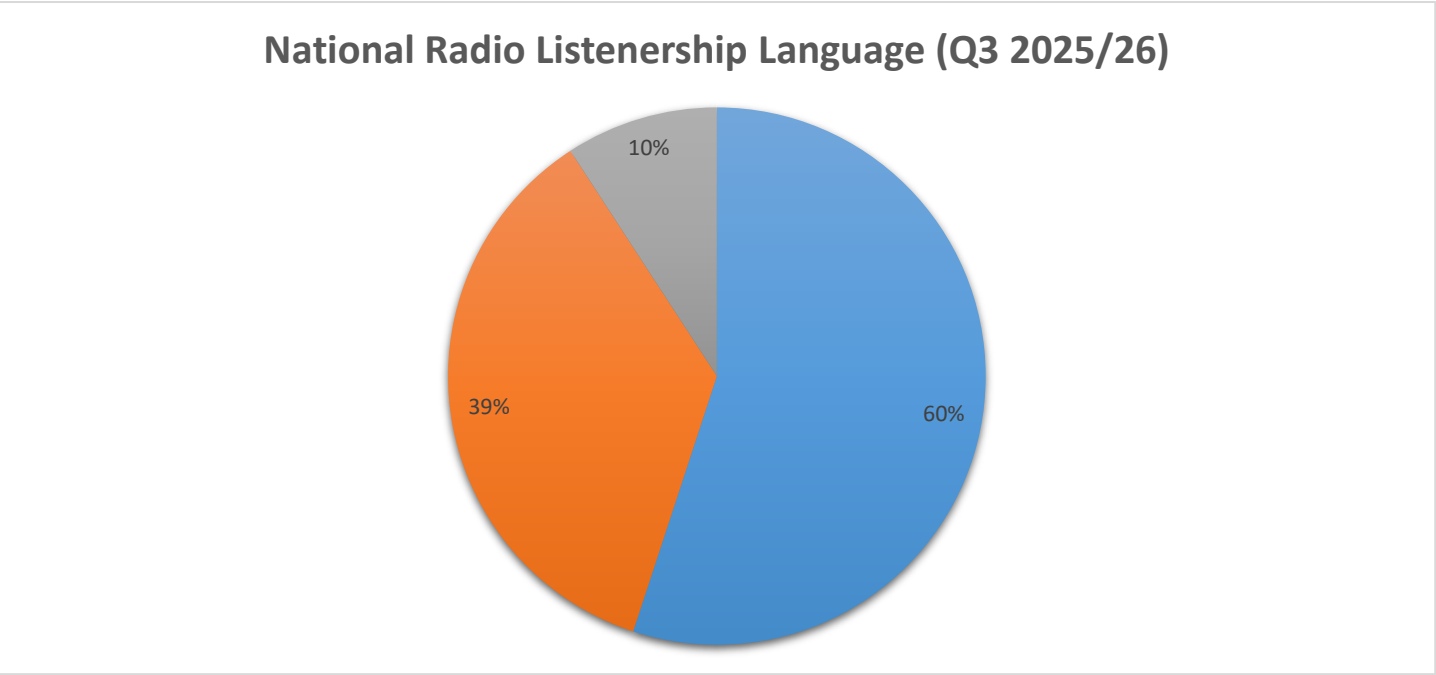
4. Results

4.1 National Language Preferences

Nationally, Swahili is the dominant language of radio consumption in Kenya, accounting for 60% of listenership. Vernacular languages follow at 39%, while English captures just 10% of listeners. These figures have remained relatively stable across the four quarters of data collection (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17).

Language	Percentage of Listeners
Swahili	60%
Vernacular	39%
English	10%

Table 1: National Radio Listenership Language (Q3 2025/26)



Note: Percentages sum to more than 100% as listeners may tune into multiple language stations. Source: Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026, p. 17)

4.2 Language Preferences by Gender

Language preferences in radio listening exhibit notable gender differences. Swahili is the most preferred language for both male and female listeners, but with important variations. Over 60% of male listeners and around mid-50% of female listeners tune into Swahili-language stations (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report,

2026, p. 16). Vernacular stations are the second most preferred, with "consistently higher uptake among female audiences compared to males" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 16). English-language stations attract the smallest share of listeners for both genders, "remaining stable at low levels across quarters and genders" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 16).

Language	Male	Female
Swahili	60%+	~55%
Vernacular	Lower	Higher
English	Low	Low

Table 2: Radio Listenership Language by Gender (Q3 2025/26). Source: Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026, p. 16)

The higher uptake of vernacular radio among female listeners is a notable finding. This may reflect the greater cultural embeddedness of vernacular languages in domestic and community contexts, where women often serve as primary caregivers and cultural transmitters. It may also reflect gender differences in education and labor force participation, with women having lower average levels of formal education and thus less exposure to English and, to a lesser extent, Swahili.

4.3 Language Preferences by Setting (Rural/Urban)

Language preferences in radio listening differ substantially between rural and urban areas. Swahili remains the main language used for radio listening in both settings, but vernacular stations are "more widely listened to in rural areas than in urban settings" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 16). Conversely, "urban listeners show a much stronger preference for English-language stations, with listenership levels almost three times higher than those in rural areas" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 16).

Language	Rural	Urban
Swahili	High	High
Vernacular	Higher	Lower
English	Low (~3x lower)	Higher (~3x higher)

Table 3: Radio Listenership Language by Setting (Q3 2025/26). Source: Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026, p. 16)

The higher vernacular listenership in rural areas reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of Kenya's rural populations, as well as the limited penetration of national (Swahili and English) media in some rural contexts. The higher English listenership in urban areas reflects the concentration of educated, higher-income populations in cities, as well as the availability of English-language content tailored to urban audiences.

4.4 Language Preferences by Socioeconomic Status (LSM)

Language preferences in radio listening are strongly stratified by socioeconomic status, as measured by the Living Standards Measure (LSM). Swahili and vernacular languages remain the main languages used for radio listening among lower to middle LSM groups (LSM 1-11), "with over 60% tuning into Swahili stations and strong vernacular listenership, particularly in LSM 1-4" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 16). Among higher LSM listeners (LSM 12+), "Swahili listenership is lower at around the mid-50% range, while English radio listening is notably higher and continues to increase, indicating a stronger preference for English-language content among higher-income audiences" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 16).

LSM Category	Swahili	Vernacular	English
LSM 1-4 (Lowest)	High (60%+)	Strongest	Very Low
LSM 5-7	High (60%+)	Strong	Low
LSM 8-11	High (60%+)	Moderate	Moderate
LSM 12+ (Highest)	~55%	Lower	Highest

Table 4: Radio Listenership Language by LSM (Q3 2025/26). Source: Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026, pp. 16-17)

This socioeconomic gradient reflects the broader status hierarchy of languages in Kenya. English, as the language of elite education, governance, and international communication, carries high prestige and is associated with higher social status. Swahili, while also an official language, is more widely spoken across all social classes. Vernacular languages, while culturally significant, are often associated with lower social status and limited formal education.

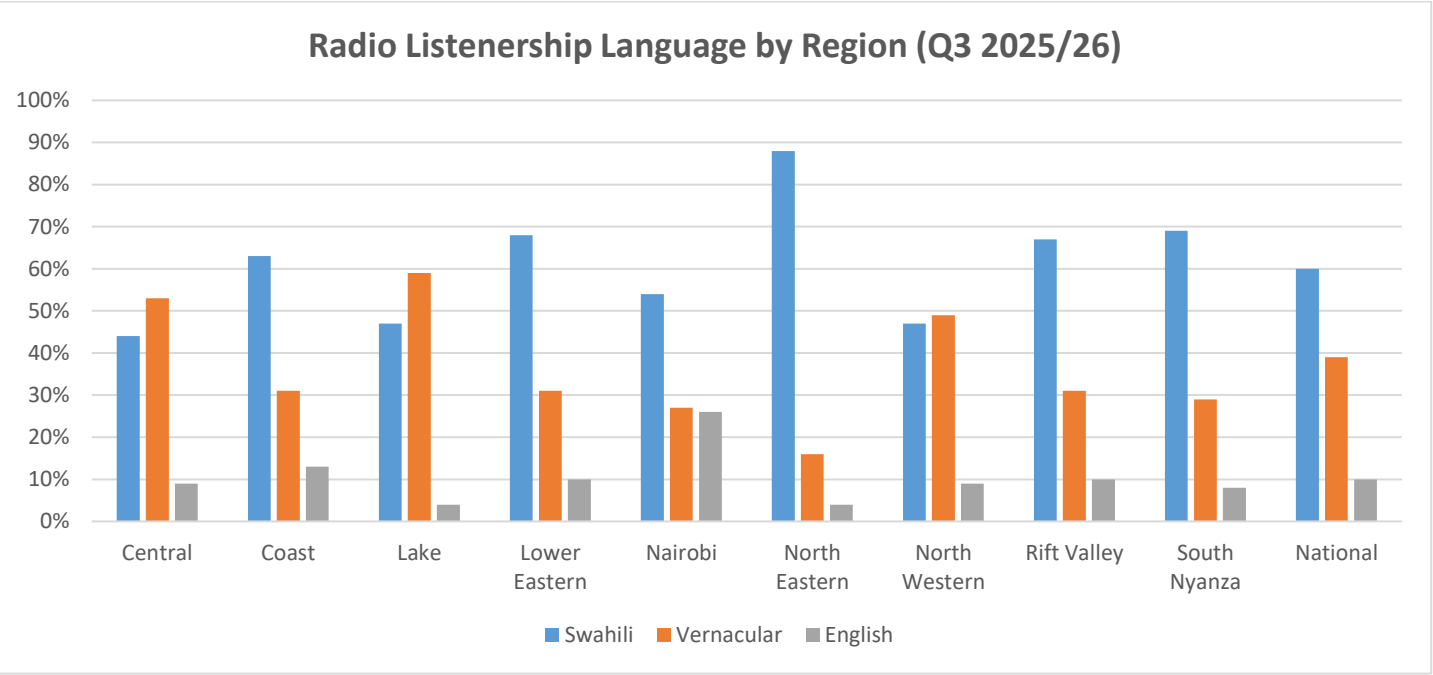
4.5 Regional Variations

Regional variations in radio language preferences are substantial, reflecting Kenya's linguistic diversity and the uneven distribution of language communities.

Region	Swahili	Vernacular	English
Central	44%	53%	9%
Coast	63%	31%	13%
Lake	47%	59%	4%
Lower Eastern	68%	31%	10%
Nairobi	54%	27%	26%
North Eastern	88%	16%	4%
North Western	47%	49%	9%

Region	Swahili	Vernacular	English
Rift Valley	67%	31%	10%
South Nyanza	69%	29%	8%
National	60%	39%	10%

Table 5: Radio Listenership Language by Region (Q3 2025/26). Source: Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026, pp. 16-17)



4.5.1 Swahili-Language Radio

Swahili-language radio stations have the strongest following in North Eastern and Western regions, "consistently exceeding 75%, with Western remaining the highest at around 88% in Q3 2025/26" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17). Similarly, "strong Swahili preference is observed in Rift" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17). North Eastern's exceptionally high Swahili listenership (88%) is notable given the region's predominantly pastoralist population and proximity to Somalia, where Swahili is less widely spoken. This may reflect the region's limited vernacular radio options, forcing listeners to tune into Swahili-language stations.

Swahili listenership is lower in Central (44%), Lake (47%), and North Western (47%), where vernacular languages are stronger. These regions are home to large ethnic communities with well-established vernacular radio stations (e.g., Gikuyu in Central, Luo in Lake, Luhya in North Western).

4.5.2 Vernacular-Language Radio

Vernacular radio "maintains its highest uptake in Lower Eastern and Lake regions, where it exceeds 60% of listeners, reflecting strong cultural and linguistic ties" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17). Central region also shows strong vernacular listenership at 53%. These patterns reflect the concentration of specific ethnic communities in these regions and the availability of vernacular radio stations catering to their linguistic preferences.

Vernacular listenership is lowest in North Eastern (16%), Nairobi (27%), and Coast (31%), where populations

are more linguistically diverse or where Swahili and English dominate.

4.5.3 English-Language Radio

English-language radio, "though limited in reach overall, continues to see relatively higher traction in urbanized regions like Nairobi and North Eastern, with Nairobi maintaining a consistent 24% share" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17). English listenership is lowest in Lake (4%) and North Eastern (4%), reflecting these regions' predominantly rural populations and limited exposure to English-language media.

4.6 Radio Genre Preference

Radio listenership in Kenya is strongly driven by news and current affairs, which "account for nearly half of listeners (46.7%), highlighting radio's central role as a trusted source of information" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 15). Entertainment and talk shows follow as "the second most popular genre, attracting about a fifth of the audience" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 15). Music and sports occupy a middle position, while "religious or inspirational content draws a smaller audience, and educational, informative, and lifestyle or cultural content remain niche with minimal reach" (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 15).

Genre	Percentage
News and Current Affairs	46.7%
Entertainment and Talk Shows	~20%
Music	Moderate
Sports	Moderate
Religious/Inspirational	Smaller
Educational/Informative	Niche
Lifestyle/Cultural	Niche

Table 6: Radio Genre Preference (Q3 2025/26). Source: Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026, p. 15)

The dominance of news and current affairs in radio listening is significant for understanding language preferences. Listeners may prefer to receive news in the language they understand most comfortably, which for many Kenyans is Swahili or their vernacular language. This may help explain why English, despite its prestige, captures only a small share of radio listenership: for most Kenyans, English is not the most accessible language for understanding news and current affairs.

5. Discussion

5.1 Explaining the Dominance of Swahili

Swahili's dominance in radio listening (60% nationally) reflects its unique position in Kenyan society as both a national language and a lingua franca. As the Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026) documents, Swahili is the most preferred language across all demographic categories, with particularly strong following in North Eastern (88%) and Western (88%) regions.

Several factors explain Swahili's dominance:

First, Swahili's status as a national language gives it symbolic and practical significance. As the language of national identity, Swahili is associated with belonging and citizenship, making it an attractive choice for radio broadcasters seeking to reach broad audiences.

Second, Swahili's role as a lingua franca enables communication across Kenya's diverse linguistic communities. In a country with over 60 languages, Swahili provides a common medium that can reach audiences across ethnic and regional boundaries.

Third, Swahili's accessibility makes it more widely understood than English. While English is an official language, its use is concentrated among educated, urban populations. Swahili, by contrast, is spoken across a wider range of social classes and educational levels.

Fourth, Swahili-language radio stations have invested heavily in content production and distribution, creating a virtuous cycle in which listener preferences reinforce broadcaster investment.

5.2 The Persistence of Vernacular Radio

Despite Swahili's dominance, vernacular radio remains a significant force, accounting for 39% of listenership nationally and exceeding 60% in some regions. The persistence of vernacular radio reflects several factors:

Cultural identity and belonging. As the sociolinguistic literature suggests, language is a primary marker of ethnic identity. Vernacular radio provides listeners with a sense of cultural connection and belonging that national languages cannot replicate. As research from Nigeria found, "cultural connection (36.2%) and ease of understanding (34.2%)" are primary reasons for preferring vernacular radio (Umuji et al., 2025, p. 120).

Accessibility and comprehensibility. For many Kenyans, particularly those with limited formal education, vernacular languages are the most accessible medium for understanding news, information, and entertainment. Vernacular radio thus serves an important function in democratizing access to information.

Community engagement. Vernacular radio stations often have strong community ties, providing a platform for local voices, issues, and perspectives that national broadcasters may overlook. This community engagement creates listener loyalty that transcends purely linguistic considerations.

Cultural preservation. Vernacular radio plays a significant role in preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages. As Mudzanani and Mathe (2025) argue, "African radio can serve as a platform to bridge the diversity of languages by reflecting the coexistence of speakers, rather than limiting itself to a few major languages" (p. 2).

The gender dimension of vernacular radio is particularly noteworthy. The higher uptake of vernacular radio among female listeners (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 16) may reflect women's roles as primary caregivers and cultural transmitters within families and communities. It may also reflect gender differences in education and labor force participation, with women having lower average levels of formal education and thus less exposure to English and, to a lesser extent, Swahili.

5.3 The Niche Status of English-Language Radio

English-language radio captures just 10% of listenership nationally, with its strongest following in Nairobi (26%) and among higher LSM groups. This niche status reflects several factors:

The prestige-economics paradox. English carries high prestige as the language of elite education, governance, and international communication. However, its prestige does not translate into widespread radio listenership because most Kenyans do not understand English comfortably enough to use it as their primary radio language. This creates a paradox: English is valued symbolically but not practically for most radio listeners.

Urban concentration. English-language radio is concentrated in urban areas, particularly Nairobi, where educated, higher-income populations are located (Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report, 2026, p. 17). This urban concentration reflects the socioeconomic stratification of English proficiency.

Content differentiation. English-language radio stations often differentiate themselves through content (e.g., international news, Western music, business programming) that appeals to specific niche audiences. This content differentiation, while valuable for reaching specific demographics, limits their overall reach.

Competition from other media. English-language content is more readily available through other media, particularly digital platforms and print media. For listeners seeking English-language content, these alternative platforms may be more attractive than radio.

5.4 Regional Patterns and Anomalies

The regional patterns in radio language preferences reveal both expected and unexpected findings.

Expected patterns include the high vernacular listenership in Lake (59%), Central (53%), and North Western (49%), regions with strong ethnic communities and well-established vernacular radio stations. Similarly, the high Swahili listenership in South Nyanza (69%), Rift Valley (67%), and Lower Eastern (68%) reflects these regions' linguistic diversity and the role of Swahili as a lingua franca.

Unexpected patterns include North Eastern's exceptionally high Swahili listenership (88%) despite the region's predominantly pastoralist population and proximity to Somalia. This may reflect the limited availability of vernacular radio options in the region, forcing listeners to tune into Swahili-language stations. Alternatively, it may reflect the influence of Swahili as a regional lingua franca in the Horn of Africa.

Nairobi's relatively balanced language profile (Swahili 54%, Vernacular 27%, English 26%) reflects the capital's cosmopolitan, multilingual population. Nairobi's higher English listenership (26%) is consistent with its role as the center of elite education, governance, and international business.

5.5 Implications for Broadcasters and Language Policy

The findings have significant implications for broadcasters, language policymakers, and cultural heritage practitioners.

For broadcasters, the findings underscore the importance of linguistic diversity in programming strategies. While Swahili reaches the largest audience nationally, vernacular radio remains essential for reaching specific communities, particularly in rural areas and among female listeners. Broadcasters seeking to maximize reach should consider multilingual programming that combines Swahili, vernacular, and English content to appeal to diverse audiences.

For language policymakers, the findings highlight the continuing importance of vernacular broadcasting for cultural preservation and linguistic diversity. As the Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report (2026) notes, "Kenyan broadcasters have a strong opportunity to capitalize on locally relevant content, including vernacular programming, cultural storytelling, and locally produced entertainment" (p. 38). Language policy should support this opportunity by creating incentives for vernacular broadcasting and ensuring that indigenous languages are not marginalized in the digital transition.

For cultural heritage practitioners, the findings suggest that radio remains a powerful medium for cultural preservation and transmission. Vernacular radio's role in maintaining intergenerational language transmission and

cultural continuity should be recognized and supported. As research on indigenous language preservation has shown, "mainstream radio combined with social media can do more to preserve indigenous languages than either can on their own" (NWU, 2025, p. 1).

6. Conclusion

This study has examined language preferences in radio listening across Kenya, drawing on nationally representative data from the Communication Authority of Kenya's *Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report* (April 2026). The analysis reveals that Swahili dominates radio consumption nationally (60%), followed by vernacular languages (39%), while English remains a niche preference (10%). However, these aggregate figures mask significant demographic and regional variations that reflect the complex interplay of cultural identity, socioeconomic stratification, infrastructure, and language policy.

The study's three research questions are answered as follows:

RQ1: Overall language preferences in radio listening are strongly shaped by gender, setting, and socioeconomic status. Swahili is the most preferred language across all demographics, but vernacular radio has higher uptake among female listeners, rural populations, and lower socioeconomic groups, while English-language radio is concentrated among urban, higher-income audiences.

RQ2: Regional variations are substantial, with Swahili reaching its highest penetration in North Eastern (88%) and Western (88%), vernacular languages dominating in Lake (59%) and Central (53%), and English strongest in Nairobi (26%) and Coast (13%).

RQ3: The observed patterns are best explained by a combination of cultural identity (vernacular radio's role in community belonging), socioeconomic stratification (English's association with elite status), infrastructure (urban concentration of English-language content), and language policy (Swahili's status as a national language and *lingua franca*).

The study contributes to scholarship in sociolinguistics, media linguistics, and language policy by providing empirical evidence on the spatial and demographic dimensions of radio language preferences in a multilingual African context. The findings underscore the importance of linguistic diversity in Kenya's media landscape and the continuing relevance of vernacular radio for cultural preservation and community engagement.

Future research should examine the relationship between radio language preferences and broader patterns of language use and shift in Kenya; investigate the role of digital platforms in shaping language preferences; and assess the effectiveness of policy interventions designed to support linguistic diversity in broadcasting. Longitudinal studies would enable analysis of how language preferences evolve over time, particularly as digital media continue to transform the media landscape.

As Kenya continues its digital transformation, ensuring linguistic diversity in broadcasting remains a critical policy priority. The findings of this study provide an evidence base for broadcasters, policymakers, and cultural heritage practitioners seeking to navigate Kenya's complex multilingual mediascape.

Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from the Communication Authority of Kenya's *Audience Measurement and Industry Trends Report* (April 2026). The report is publicly available on the Communication Authority of Kenya's official repository at <https://www.ca.go.ke>. The author acknowledges the Communication Authority of Kenya as the source of the primary data used in this analysis. The analysis, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or official position of the Communication Authority of Kenya.

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