

Linguistic Exclusion in South African E-Governance

A Qualitative Study of Xitsonga-Speakers' Access to Digital Public Services

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Abstract

Digital platforms offer new avenues for public service access, yet indigenous communities like Xitsonga speakers in South Africa face exclusion due to language barriers in e-government and ICT tools. This qualitative study investigates how integrating Xitsonga into digital spaces can enhance access to essential services, revealing that the current systems marginalise indigenous language users, limiting their government engagement. Framed through Decolonial Theory, Language Rights, and Ubuntu philosophy, the findings reveal that the current systems marginalise indigenous language users, limiting their government engagement. The findings underscore the need for inclusive digital policies and platform design to bridge the digital divide. The study contributes to debates on language equity, digital access, and equitable service delivery, offering actionable recommendations for policymakers.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, Digital Governance, Xitsonga, Digital Divide, E-Government.

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has fundamentally transformed public service delivery, shifting many essential government services from in-person consultations to digital platforms. This global trend towards civic technology, digital tools designed to promote citizen engagement, transparency, and participation, is reflected in South Africa's growing digital landscape. The proliferation of apps for tracking services, filing applications, and reporting corruption aims to make governance more efficient and accessible (Ohamadike, 2025; Lesame & Malatji, 2022). Nationally, digital participation is significant with over 50.8 million internet users (78.9% of the population) and 124 million cellular connections, indicating widespread, multi-device usage (HelloYesMarketing, 2025).

However, this digital forward leap has a profound exclusionary flaw: the infrastructure is monolingual. In a nation constitutionally committed to twelve official languages (including sign language), South Africa's civic technology is overwhelmingly delivered in only one language, English. This turns a tool of empowerment into a mechanism of marginalisation, creating what can be termed a governance failure and a technical oversight (Ohamadike, 2025). The consequence is not merely a technological limitation but a daily, real-life barrier for millions, restricting their access to essential services like job applications, healthcare information, and social grants.

While this is a systemic issue affecting many indigenous languages, its impact is acutely felt by speakers of Xitsonga, a language spoken by 4.7% of the population. For Xitsonga-speaking communities, the promise of digital governance is a hollow one. They are caught between a constitutional guarantee of linguistic equity (Constitution, 1996, Section 6) and the reality of English-only digital platforms. This disconnect is exacerbated by the failure of key legislation, such as the Use of Official Languages Act (2012), which mandates multilingual government services but remains unenforced in the digital realm. As Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues to shape economic development, this linguistic exclusion risks locking out not only individuals, but the entire language communities from the future digital economy (Primus, 2025).

Therefore, this study moves from the broad problem of digital language exclusion to a focused investigation of the Xitsonga-speaking experience. This research investigates the specific barriers Xitsonga speakers face in accessing South African e-government services and explores their proposed solutions for more equitable digital governance. Furthermore, it analyses the critical policy gaps, specifically the failure of the Use of Official Languages Act (2012) that enable and perpetuate this linguistic marginalisation.

Research Problem

Despite constitutional guarantees of linguistic equity, Xitsonga speakers face systematic exclusion from essential e-government services due to the English-only design of digital platforms. This language barrier actively disenfranchises citizens, violating their rights, and eroding trust in the state, while existing policy, such as the Use of Official Languages Act (2012), fails to provide an enforceable remedy in the digital sphere. This study investigates this gap between policy and practice by focusing on the lived experiences of the Xitsonga speech community.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant for four key reasons:

- 1. Policy Relevance:** It generates empirical evidence that can compel policymakers to amend and proactively enforce the Use of Official Languages Act within digital services, directly advancing the implementation of 'Batho Pele' (People First) principles.
- 2. Theoretical Contribution:** It extends decolonial and linguistic human rights theories by applying them to the digital realm, introducing the concept of "digital coloniality" to explain how colonial-era linguistic hierarchies are reproduced in state architecture.
- 3. Social Justice:** It centres the voices of a marginalised speech community, advocating

for linguistic justice by framing access to government services in one's mother tongue as a fundamental human right, consistent with the Ubuntu ethic of collective dignity.

4. **Practical Impact:** The community-proposed solutions identified in this study provide a practical, ground-truth blueprint for government departments and platform developers to create more accessible and inclusive e-governance tools.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following primary research question and its sub-questions:

1. How do Xitsonga speakers experience and navigate linguistic exclusion on South African e-government platforms?
2. What are the specific barriers and socio-emotional impacts of English-only digital platforms on Xitsonga speakers?
3. What coping strategies, such as intergenerational dependency or translation tools, do they employ?
4. What community-driven solutions do participants propose for more inclusive digital governance?

Methodology

This research is located within the qualitative research paradigm to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, emotions, and perspectives within a digital exclusion context (Rapanyane, 2021; Tenny et al., 2022). This approach prioritises detailed, context-rich insights and allows for an open-ended investigation while minimising researcher bias by centering participant voices (Mwita, 2022).

Research Design and Site Selection

An exploratory case study design was employed to examine Xitsonga-speaking communities' experiences with e-government platforms (Yin, 2003). This design was selected for its ability to analyse real-world phenomena within their natural context, making it ideal for investigating how language barriers impact digital service accessibility. The study was conducted in Chiawelo, Soweto, Johannesburg, in the Gauteng Province. This area was purposively selected for its significant Xitsonga-speaking population, providing a rich context to explore the intersection of linguistic identity and access to essential digital public services.

Data Collection and Sources

Data were collected from primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Primary data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Xitsonga-speaking participants. Interviews focused on their experiences with three key national e-government platforms:

1. The SASSA online portal for social grants.
2. The Department of Home Affairs e-Services (e.g., smart ID applications).
3. The central government services portal (www.gov.za).

For secondary data, a critical policy analysis was conducted using the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Chapter 1, Section 6) and the Use of Official Languages Act, No. 12 of 2012. These documents, accessed via the South African Government Gazette (www.gov.za), were analysed alongside primary findings to assess the gap between legislative intent and real-world implementation.

Participant Sampling and Demographics

A non-probability, purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who were Xitsonga speakers and had experience with the target e-government services (Vehovar et al., 2016). The initial target was 8 – 10 participants. However, recruitment challenges, including participant reluctance due to concerns about scams and data privacy, resulted in a final sample of five individuals. While small, this sample size is consistent with in-depth qualitative inquiry where the priority is thematic saturation over statistical generalisability (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic saturation was confirmed as the final interviews yielded redundant information, and no new themes emerged.

The participant cohort was diverse, ensuring a wide spectrum of experiences. Demographic details are summarised in the table below:

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education Level	Key E-Gov Services Used
P1	38	Female	Nurse	University Degree	Home Affairs, Gov.za
P2	27	Male	Business Owner	Matric (Grade 12)	Gov.za, SASSA
P3	59	Male	Domestic Worker	Primary School	SASSA
P4	56	Male	Officer	Diploma	Home Affairs, Gov.za
P5	26	Female	Unemployed	Matric (Grade 12)	SASSA, Gov.za

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, following a structured six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Dawadi, 2020). The process involved: 1) familiarisation with the data through transcription and translation from Xitsonga to English while preserving participants' original phrasing; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing potential themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing the report. Analysis was conducted using Microsoft Word for clarity and organisation.

The study adhered to strict ethical standards in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act. All participants provided verbal consent, and their anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms (P1–P5) throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-layered theoretical approach to examine the exclusion of Xitsonga speakers from digital spaces. Decolonial Theory is placed as the foundational lens, used to diagnose the root of the problem. This perspective is then given moral force by the Language Rights Framework, which articulates the exclusion as a rights violation and is guided toward solutions by the Ubuntu Philosophy, which provides an African-centred ethical blueprint for inclusion. Together, these frameworks move from critiquing the colonial past to demanding justice in the present, and envisioning an equitable future.

Decolonial Theory: Diagnosing the Roots of Digital Exclusion

Decolonial Theory argues that political independence does not dismantle the deep-seated structures of power, knowledge, and established by colonialism, a condition termed “coloniality” (Quijano, 2000; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2013) concept of “coloniality of power” provides a foundational lens for understanding how these colonial hierarchies persist in post-apartheid South Africa’s digital spaces. In this context, this manifests through what Kroeze (2024) termed “digital coloniality”, the reproduction of colonial linguistic hierarchies through technological platforms that privilege European languages while marginalising indigenous knowledge systems. This theory allows for the English-domination of e-government to be framed not as a simple oversight, but as an active continuation of colonial oppression and epistemicide (the killing of knowledge systems).

Language Rights Framework: Naming the Injustice

Drawn from the field of linguistic human rights, this framework posits that language rights are fundamental human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017; Phillipson, 1992). Skutnabb-Kangas’s (2017) linguistic human rights theory positions access to government services in indigenous languages as a fundamental right, not just a convenience. It distinguishes between tolerance-oriented rights (allowing indigenous languages to exist) and promotion-oriented rights (actively supporting their development and use). This study argues that by failing to integrate Xitsonga into digital platforms, the South African government operates at a mere tolerance level, thereby violating its duty to uphold promotion-oriented rights. This framework transforms participants’ frustration into a legitimate claim for justice and holds the state accountable to its constitutional and international obligations.

Ubuntu Philosophy: Charting an Ethical Path Forward

‘Ubuntu’ is an African humanist philosophy centred on communal interdependence and mutual care, often summarised by the phrase “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (a person is a person because of other people) (Shutte, 2009; Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Ubuntu (Ramose, 2015), encapsulated in the Xitsonga phrase “*munhu I munhu hi van’wana*”, emphasises collective responsibility and interconnectedness over individuality. It therefore challenges individualistic approaches to digital literacy that place the burden on users to adopt English-dominated systems. Instead, Ubuntu posits that digital inclusion is a collective responsibility requiring systemic changes to accommodate all community members. This philosophy provides the ethical grounds to critique the shame and dependency caused by exclusion and to validate the community-driven solutions proposed by participants, framing inclusion as a necessary condition for collective dignity. The interplay between the three core theories guiding this analysis – Decolonial Theory, Language Rights, and

Ubuntu philosophy – is illustrated in Figure 1, demonstrating their complementary roles in diagnosing the problem, articulating the injustice, and envisioning solutions.

An Integrated Analytical Chain

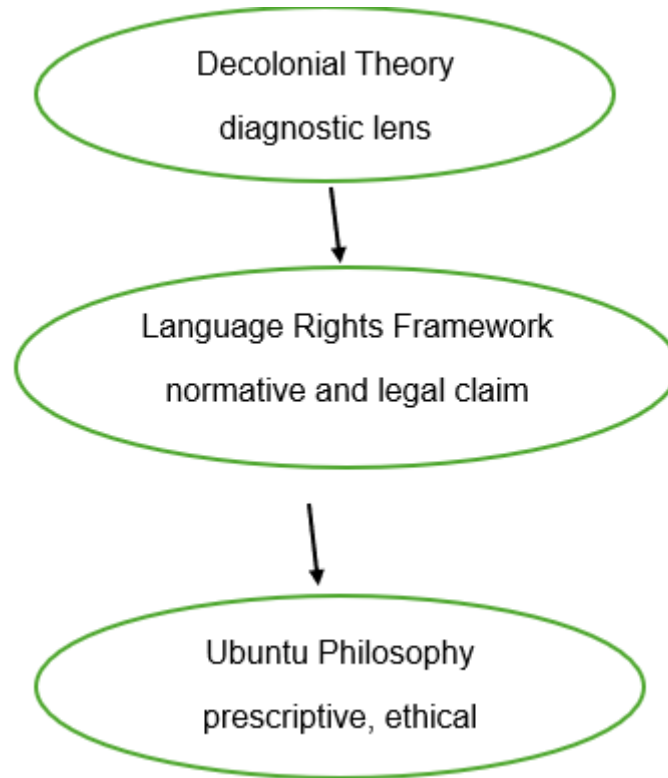


Figure 1: The cohesive analytical chain of decolonial theory, language rights, and Ubuntu philosophy.

Used in concert, this integrated framework allows for an analysis that is historically deep, legally sound, and ethically guided toward an inclusive future.

Literature Review

The digitisation of government services or e-governance promises greater efficiency, transparency, and accessibility for citizens. In a multilingual society like South Africa, this promise is intrinsically linked to the question of language. This literature review critically examines the existing scholarship on the intersection of indigenous languages, digital technology, and public service delivery in South Africa. It argues that the historical marginalisation of indigenous languages, established during the colonial and apartheid eras, is being systematically reproduced in the digital realm. By synthesising research on historical language policy, the current state of indigenous languages and the problematics of digital technology, this review will demonstrate a critical research gap: a lack of focused inquiry into the lived experiences of specific linguistic communities, such as Xitsonga speakers, as they navigate an increasingly digital state. This gap underscores the urgent need for the present study.

The Historical Roots of Linguistic Marginalisation

South Africa's democratic Constitution of 1996 promised a decisive break from apartheid's linguistic imperialism, explicitly granting eleven languages "parity of esteem" and equitable treatment. This was a radical departure from a past where colonial powers systematically undermined African languages by imposing their own languages, a practice that devalued indigenous knowledge systems and instilled lasting linguistic hierarchies (Azubuike & Aji, 2021; Adedokun & Zulu, 2022). However, the transition to genuine multilingualism has been incomplete. Scholars argue that the post-colonial landscape is often characterised by a "lack of political will," resulting in language regulations that are forgiving of former colonial languages and poorly implemented for indigenous ones (Adedokun & Zulu, 2022). The consequence, as Balfour (2019) contends, is that millions of citizens cannot fully participate in national life, this includes the judiciary, economy, and public administration when it is conducted in an "imported" language they do not comprehend. This failure to realise constitutional promises has created a persistent gap between policy and practice, setting the stage for old inequities to be reproduced in new digital contexts.

The Digital Shift: A New Frontier for Old Exclusions

The rapid digitisation of public services, part of the broader Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), has transformed citizen-state interaction. Yet, this shift has become a critical new site where historical linguistic inequalities are being intensified. While technology is often hailed as a potential solution for language revitalisation, offering new tools for communication and access (Olaitan, Issah, & Wayi, 2021; Ndzendze, 2020), the reality for many indigenous language speakers is quite the opposite.

Research indicates that speakers of South Africa's indigenous languages often feel their languages are excluded from formal and technological communication (Gumbi, 2019). This sentiment is compounded by significant structural barriers: a severe lack of digital resources for indigenous languages, unique structural complexities that require specialised approaches, and occasional orthographic problems (SADiLaR, 2021; Malatji & Lesame, 2019). Consequently, the development of South Africa's e-government landscape has largely followed colonial-era patterns. As Malatji and Lesame (2019) note, the use of African languages in ICT remains minimal, with European languages continuing to dominate digital platforms. This creates a form of "digital neo-colonialism" where technologies that should empower instead serve as vectors for globalised content and hegemonic languages, potentially undermining local traditions and knowledge systems (Sundani, 2023). The result is that digital government risks becoming, by default, English-dominated government, effectively locking out a significant portion of the population.

Bridging the Gap: Centring the Xitsonga-Speaking Experience

The existing literature successfully establishes the broad nexus between colonial history, marginalised indigenous languages, and the digital divide. Scholars have convincingly documented the macro-level challenges, including a lack of political will (Adedokun & Zulu, 2022) and the technical barriers hindering the development of digital resources for indigenous languages (SADiLaR, 2021; Malatji & Lesame, 2019). However, a critical gap remains. The research tends to focus on systemic overviews and policy analysis, often failing to drill down into the lived, qualitative experiences of specific linguistic communities. For instance, while Malatji and Lesame (2019) highlight the minimal use

of African languages in ICT, their work does not detail the socio-emotional impact or the practical coping strategies citizens employ. Similarly, broader discussions of the digital divide (e.g., Ndzendze, 2020) and linguistic marginalisation (e.g., Gumbi, 2019; Makgopa, 2022) often remain conceptual, lacking deep, empirical investigation into how these forces converge in the daily lives of individuals trying to access essential services.

The Xitsonga-speaking community, constituting 4.7% of the South African population, epitomises this gap (Madlome, 2022). The general challenges outlined in the literature converge acutely for this group, yet their specific plight remains largely invisible in academic research. There is a scarcity of studies that centre the voices of Xitsonga speakers themselves to understand how they navigate, interpret, and resist linguistic exclusion on e-government platforms. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by asking: How do Xitsonga speakers experience and navigate linguistic exclusion on South African e-government platforms, and what do their experiences reveal about the failures of current language policy in the digital age? By answering these questions, this research moves beyond describing the systemic problem to amplifying the grounded, human experiences that define it, providing a nuanced evidence base for more inclusive digital governance.

In summary, the literature reveals a clear and troubling trajectory: the linguistic hierarchies of South Africa's past are not being dismantled in its digital future but are being digitally reinforced. The constitutional promise of multilingualism remains unfulfilled, and the advent of e-government has created a new, high-stakes domain of exclusion. While scholars have effectively mapped the historical roots and broad structural dimensions of this problem, the human experience at its core remains underexplored. The gap in the literature is not that the problem is unknown, but that the voices of those navigating this digital marginalisation, like Xitsonga speakers, are largely absent. It is this critical gap that the present research aims to fill, using qualitative inquiry to ground the macro-level problem of digital language policy in the micro-level realities of citizen experience. By doing so, it seeks to contribute a vital, human-centred perspective to the discourse on digital inclusion and linguistic justice in South Africa.

Findings

Theme 1: Language Barriers as Exclusion

The study confirms that participants are willing to partake in digital platforms; however, they have identified language barriers as a primary obstacle towards their participation in digital spaces. English-dominated e-government platforms allow Xitsonga speakers to be excluded from accessing essential services. Several participants have pointed out how minor misunderstandings of a word error led to significant misunderstandings, undermining their ability to complete applications accurately:

as Participant 1 explained, “One English word misunderstood changes the answer and makes everything incorrect”.

This aligns with Hietaranta's (2014: 3-4) cognitive theory of translation errors: misinterpretations force the brain to accept plausible yet flawed solutions; therefore, users overlook inconsistencies in their translated content. For Xitsonga speakers, this creates a double vulnerability, a linguistic marginalisation compounded by cognitive bias where even a minor error distorts access to jobs or grants, reinforcing digital exclusion.

Critically, translation is not neutral nor purely a mechanical act, it is deeply embedded within the context of culture, words carry connotations, values, and historical baggage that differ across linguistic boundaries (Mahammadjonova, 2025: 2). When a Xitsonga speaker tries to translate the e-government information to their home language, they apply their language's cultural context to understand the information according to the culture. For example, Participant 3 struggles with “misinterpreted words changing the meaning of the paragraph”, which shows how the technical jargon, such as public tender, lacks a conceptual framework in Xitsonga. These oversights compound exclusion, and minor misunderstandings lead to “missed opportunities” (Participant 3) for grants and jobs.

This exclusion is aggravated when Xitsonga speakers become cautious of machine-generated translations, therefore withdraw entirely, an issue explored in theme 2.

Theme 2: Distrust in Translation

This study found that translation tools exist to convert between Xitsonga and English, yet Xitsonga speakers remain deeply sceptical about automated translation systems. Their distrust stems from recognising that these tools lack the cultural competency of native speakers who understand the language's contextual nuances and cultural roots. As Participant 1 explained, “Some people try to translate languages without proper understanding of the indigenous language, but if someone who knows Xitsonga deeply were to translate it, I would believe their work”.

This scepticism reflects what Helm et al. (2025: 8–9) termed “techno-linguistic bias”, the phenomenon whereby technology is built to work better for English while marginalising Xitsonga. This distrust is rooted in participants' direct experiences with translation tools. Both participants 1 and 3 expressed frustration with automated systems, with one stating, “it is (machine translation) wrong half the time” and emphasising the need for human linguists to preserve meaning.

Translation accuracy concerns

The table below illustrates critical translation errors discovered when testing Google Translate with Xitsonga terms commonly used in government contexts.

Table 1: Tested on Google Translate (June 2024). Results may vary with updates. (Author's own table, 2025)

Xitsonga Word	Google Translation	Correct Translation	Risk in E-Gov
Nhluvuko	Hambana	Development	Distorts policy information
Mbvhoma wa mathlarhi ya masocha	Drone ya masocha	Military drone	Fuel distrust in government tech.

These errors exemplify Giunchiglia et al. (2023: 2) described as “lexical untranslability”, the inherent difficulty of translating certain concepts across linguistic boundaries. The mistranslation of “nhluvuko” (development) as “Hambana” (differences) demonstrates how these errors used daily could mislead Xitsonga speakers when accessing policy documents, potentially resulting in a misunderstanding of government programs or services.

Theme 3: Intergenerational Dependency

The study confirmed that Xitsonga speakers depend on younger tech-literate family members to access monolingual digital spaces and e-government websites because of the language barrier, which shows the digital literacy gap. Depending on younger family members created shame and disappointment, according to participants, as it is believed that the elders should be the ones helping the younger generation, according to the culture, this brought power imbalances in Xitsonga-speaking households.

Participant 3: “I had to call someone to translate and understand some of the words on the website since they are more educated than I am.”

Participant 4: “I had to ask someone to apply for me since I did not go to school. The challenge is understanding what they mean in English.”

The participants highlighted the emotional strain of relying on others to access the internet for government services and resources meant for all South African citizens. The need to call for assistance in accessing their government underscores a perceived loss of dignity and autonomy. Thus, those without formal education face compound exclusion.

Theme 4: Community-Proposed Solutions

The study confirms that Xitsonga speakers acknowledge the challenges they face when accessing e-government websites and apps; thus, participants have proposed community-driven and technological solutions to bridge the language gap in e-government platforms, emphasising accessibility and cultural relevance.

Participant 5: “They (the government) should add videos that explain the process in Xitsonga.”

Participant 3: “Let us record enquiries in Xitsonga and get responses in Xitsonga.”

These solutions align with the oral traditions that prioritises auditory learning. Oladele and McCall (2024: 6–8) state that auditory learning would allow Xitsonga speakers to advance their comprehension and information retention to advance their understanding of the content presented, further, this would allow Xitsonga speakers to create a stronger mental association and solidify their understanding of the material.

Participant 2: “The government should create offices with Xitsonga helpers for free application and remove the need for data to access their websites and apps.”

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to examine the exclusion of Xitsonga speakers from e-government platforms due to a language barrier. The study highlights factors beyond individual citizens’ control, such as English-language dominance, resulting in dependency and distrust. The findings of this research are consistent with prior studies conducted by Ranchordas (2021), Saeed and Masters (2021), and Mlambo and Matfunjwa (2024), which also demonstrate the exclusivity of English-dominated ICT platforms.

Coloniality of Power and Epistemic Violence in Digital Governance

These findings expose the gap in South African language policy (2012), an advocate for multilingualism, yet fails to enforce multilingualism in digital governance, reinforcing exclusion, what Participant 5 called “undermining Xitsonga”. This mirrors the broader critiques of decolonisation of digital spaces, as Eurocentricity continues to dominate spaces of pluralistic societies (Langmia & Sani, 2025: 2).

The constitution recognition of indigenous languages (section 6, 1996) marked a significant rupture from apartheid’s linguistic imperialism. However, Participant 1’s testimony stating “I have never come across a Xitsonga government website. Everything is in English” reveals a promise that only exists in the state of becoming, a deferred reality that mirrors what Ndlovu–Gatsheni (2013: 18) noted as “coloniality of power” in post–colonial democracies. The absence of a language spoken by 4.7% of the South African population from government services exposes neoliberal democracy as a replication of apartheid–era marginalisation.

The exclusion of Xitsonga from e–government platforms is a bureaucratic failure and an epistemic violence against Xitsonga speakers (Brunner, 2023). This results in the erosion of trust in the state, reducing Xitsonga speakers to second–class digital citizens instead of first–class digital citizens due to the government’s failure to include Xitsonga in their digital government service providers (Schous & Hjelholt, 2018; Magro, 2012).

Policy Failure and the Performance of Democracy

The Use of Official Language Act was enacted to monitor and regulate the use of official languages by the national government, while maintaining inclusivity in government information and services. However, according to the testimonies of the participants, they access information in English; therefore, Xitsonga is excluded, resulting in Xitsonga speakers’ oppression.

Section 4(2) of the Official Languages Act (2012) mandates bilingual government services; however, it fails to recognise digital platforms as sites for service delivery. The Act’s silence on digital spaces marks what Ding (2020: 24) termed “performative democracy”, where good governance policies are portrayed, yet their objectives are not achieved. The Act’s (2012: 4) permission for departments to select languages based on practicality creates a critical loophole that institutionalises colonial language preferences. This discretionary clause enables departments to justify English–only platforms under the guise of operational efficiency, perpetuating linguistic hierarchies despite constitutional promises.

Therefore, the absence of indigenous languages in digital technology exemplifies Ndlovu–Gatsheni’s (2013: 18) ‘coloniality of power’ whereby the neoliberal democracy only hides the colonial legacies. This is explained by Brunner (2023) as an act of epistemic violence whereby a missed opportunity because of a language barrier violates Xitsonga speakers’ rights to access to jobs, as stipulated by the Employment Equity Act No. 55 (1998).

Lessons from Global Counterparts

The challenges Xitsonga speakers face reflect the global patterns of digital linguistic exclusion. However, global states have successfully implemented interventions demonstrating that

multilingual e-governance is achievable. Kenya’s Huduma Kenya Portals offering services in both Swahili and English (eCitizen, 2025), and India’s UMANG App, which incorporates 23 languages shows how policy mandates can reshape colonial language hierarchies.

Table 2 compares how South Africa, Kenya, India, and New Zealand have adopted interventions that enable indigenous communities to be included in their e-government services.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Digital Language Inclusion Policies of South Africa, Kenya, India, and New Zealand. (Authors own table, 2025)

State	Policy	Key provision	Implementation	Lesson for South Africa
South Africa	Use of Official Language Act (2012).	Bilingual services (unenforced digitally)	English/Afrikaans dominance	Amend the Act to include digital mandates
India	Digital India Act (2015).	Multilingual government service platform	UMANG app offers 23 languages through AI	Invest in Xitsonga NLP tools with human oversight
Kenya	Digital Master Plan (2022).	Bilingual interface for assessing government services	Hudama Kenya portals in Swahili and English	Amend the Use of Official Languages Act to acknowledge digital platforms
New Zealand	Māori Language Act (2016, No.17).	Government agencies are required to provide key services in te reo Māori	Co-design with Iwi (tribal councils)	Partner with Xitsonga linguists for translations

Unlike Kenya and India, the South African policy gap reflects Skutnabb-Kangas’s (2017) linguistic human rights theory framework of tolerance rights, which only enables Xitsonga to exist as an indigenous language, yet fails to adopt models that enable Xitsonga to be used in digital spaces. Participant 5’s demand for ‘video tutorials in Xitsonga’ mirrors Kenya’s community-centric approach, suggesting a co-design as a framework to achieve promotion-oriented rights. Additionally, Participant 1’s call for ‘someone who knows Xitsonga deeply to translate’ mirrors New Zealand’s implementation strategy of working with Iwi (Tribal council) to ensure accuracy.

Ubuntu and the Path to Co-Designed Inclusion

The dependency described in Theme 3 clashes with Ubuntu’s ethos of communal support where collective care fosters personal and societal growth (Ewuosa & Hall, 2019: 5). However, while Ubuntu idealises reciprocity, the government’s failure to provide Xitsonga language services forces speakers into a one-sided reliance, framing this reliance as a burden rather than mutual aid.

Participants articulated a desire for meaningful inclusion, proposing solutions such as government-employed assistants, the need for video inquiries, and easy access tutorials to

reclaim their role as digital citizens. This call for assistance and the need for unrestricted access towards government resources should be the guiding principles of the Batho Pele framework. The government fails to rationally put the people first regarding ensuring inclusivity in South Africa. The solutions urge the government to act on the Batho Pele principles.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Legislative Reform:** The government's "efforts" to ensure inclusivity are to be seen at the marginalised communities' levels by revising the Use of Official Language Act to update the act to acknowledge digital platforms as part of service delivery. The Use of Official Languages Act amendment should mandate Xitsonga in high-impact e-government platforms such as SASSA, Labour, and Home Affairs.
2. **Co-Design with Communities:** All government tenders or contracts to design ICT for government departments should mandate the incorporation of Xitsonga as one of the indigenous languages, co-designed with native Xitsonga speakers to ensure cultural roots are preserved.
3. **Implement Multi-Modal Solutions:** The government should invest towards indigenous languages. To enhance communication, there is a need for video enquiries and video tutorials that explain a step-by-step process in Xitsonga. The existing government libraries in communities can be utilised by dedicating a section of the library towards "digital language hubs" with Xitsonga mediators, as Participants 5 and 2 suggested.

Conclusion

The study's findings revealed how the exclusion of Xitsonga from e-governance platforms perpetuates colonial hierarchies under the appearance of neoliberal democracy, violating the constitutional promise of linguistic equity. Participants' experience about requiring assistance to apply for a job and their distrust of machine translation exposes how the language barrier re-emerges from apartheid-era marginalisation. Despite the constitutional guarantees, the state's failure to enforce the Use of Official Languages Act in digital spaces highlights epistemic violence.

However, Xitsonga speakers demand co-designed solutions, such as video tutorials and community hubs that offer a blueprint for decolonial digital inclusion. The findings underscore Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) 'coloniality of power', where indigenous language erasure in e-governance mirrors broader patterns of neoliberal exclusion. This necessitates reimagining digital citizenship through Ubuntu's ethic of collective dignity (*Munhu I Munhu hi Van'wana*). Until Xitsonga speakers can access e-governments without shame or mediation, South Africa's democracy remains an unfulfilled promise.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

The study has several strengths; the first strength lies in its ability to adopt a comprehensive search strategy, encompassing Xitsonga participants' voices, academic databases, acts, and the constitutions of South Africa. Secondly, the researcher is a Xitsonga speaker;

therefore, all the raw data were accurately translated and maintained the participants' voice and emotions.

Nevertheless, the study contains limitations. Firstly, the small sample size (n=5) limits generalisability, though this was appropriate for the exploratory qualitative design. The difficulty recruiting participants due to scam concerns reflects broader trust issues with digital technologies that warrant a separate investigation. Secondly, the research was conducted within the urban Xitsonga community in Gauteng, rural experiences may differ. Future research should explore the intersection of class and education. Thirdly, the research did not include perspectives from government officials or platform developers, limiting understanding of implementation challenges from the supply side. Future studies should incorporate multi-stakeholder perspectives.

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