

Normative Gender Identities in Social Greetings across Ethnic Groups in Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper addresses a critical gap in understanding how social greeting practices perpetuate gender inequalities in multicultural societies like Tanzania. This oversight limits insights into how routine interactions contribute to the broader reproduction of gendered power dynamics. To bridge this gap, the paper examines how social greeting practices function as a medium through which gendered norms are both reflected and reinforced across diverse cultural contexts. Based on qualitative data from ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews across ten ethnic groups in Tanzania, the study analyses social greetings categorised into three primary types: gender-specific greetings addressing both men and women, greetings reserved exclusively for men, and plain, gender-neutral greetings, revealing embedded gender expectations. Revealing these gendered voices is important because it sheds light on how language and interaction perpetuate normative gender identities, providing opportunities for challenging inequalities and promoting gender equity across diverse sociocultural contexts. Guided by Judith Butler's performativity theory and Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, the findings show that greetings are not just ritualised exchanges but also performative acts that subtly communicate and sustain culturally specific gender roles. Differences in greeting styles between men and women, as well as gendered expectations within greetings, demonstrate how daily communication rituals contribute to the maintenance of social hierarchies.

Keywords: Normative gender identities, sexism, language and gender, social greetings, discourse analysis, ethnic groups

1 Introduction

Social greetings represent some of the most routine yet symbolically rich interactions in human communication, ranging from firm handshakes to cheek kisses or deferential bows, all deeply embedded in cultural norms and social expectations (Goffman, 1967). While often viewed as neutral or merely polite gestures, greetings serve as a window into broader social structures, including the performance and reinforcement of gender roles. Across societies, these rituals are not only shaped by cultural traditions but also reflect and perpetuate gendered expectations among participants (Tannen, 1990).

The examination of social greetings as mechanisms for reflecting and reinforcing gendered norms has been prompted by a chronological evolution in gender studies within sociolinguistics. Beginning in the 1970s with foundational works highlighting linguistic sexism in everyday language (Lakoff, 1975), the field progressed through the 1990s to incorporate theories of gender performativity and power dynamics in discourse (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 1989). In African contexts, this trajectory accelerated in the early 2000s, with increased focus on how colonial legacies and cultural diversity influence gendered communication (Oyewùmí, 2005). More recently, amid global movements for gender equality since the 2010s, research has

begun to address persistent inequalities in multilingual societies such as Tanzania (Mushi, 2019; Swai, 2010). However, this evolution reveals a persistent problem. Despite societal shifts toward equity, routine interactions like greetings continue to embed and sustain patriarchal hierarchies, often going unexamined for their role in reproducing gendered power dynamics in diverse ethnic settings.

This oversight constitutes a significant knowledge gap, as previous research has largely overlooked sexism in everyday greetings, particularly in non-Western contexts. For instance, while studies on Western languages have critiqued male-first naming conventions and generic masculine terms as forms of banal sexism (Spender, 1980), they rarely extend to the nuanced, culture-specific rituals in Africa, where, for example, over 120 ethnic groups in Tanzania alone exhibit variations that subtly enforce gender norms (Kishe, 2003). Frontiers in this area include emerging explorations of verbal and paralinguistic behaviours in African greetings, such as age and gender, differentiated patterns in Kisubi (Rwakakindo, 2021) and Ngoni communities (Mtenje, 2017). However, these often prioritise descriptive ethnography over critical analysis of embedded inequalities. This niche, the under-examination of greetings as sites of sexism, limits broader insights into how language perpetuates normative gender identities in cultural diversity.

To bridge this knowledge gap, the present paper examined how social greeting practices function as a medium through which gendered norms are both reflected and reinforced across diverse cultural contexts in Tanzania. By analysing greeting practices from ten ethnic groups, this study reveals how these seemingly ordinary acts contribute to the construction of gendered identities. Drawing on qualitative data, the analysis highlights how greeting performances reproduce power dynamics, encode social hierarchies, and maintain the status quo regarding gender roles. Understanding the role of social greetings in shaping gendered behaviour encourages discourse analysts to critically reflect on how ordinary actions form part of a broader system of social meaning. In doing so, this study contributes to ongoing conversations in gender studies, sociolinguistics, and cultural anthropology about how everyday interactions can subtly yet powerfully influence social structures.

2 Literature review

This literature presents how social greetings, as daily communicative practices, reflect and reinforce gendered norms among different ethnic groups in Tanzania. Using sociolinguistic and sociological perspectives, this study integrates literature to demonstrate how greetings serve as a means of socialising gender, influenced by cultural and ethnic diversity within Tanzanian society. The review examines key social institutions: family, education, media, religion, and sports, while highlighting their roles in maintaining or challenging gender norms through greeting practices.

According to the literature reviewed, family members are the primary agents of gender socialisation, profoundly influencing the development of gender roles from the earliest stages of childhood. This process occurs through a variety of mechanisms, including direct reinforcement, modelling, and subtle everyday interactions such as the use of gendered greetings and language. According to Bandura's (1977) seminal Social Learning Theory, children acquire gender-specific behaviours not merely through direct experience or reinforcement but predominantly via observation and imitation of significant role models, most notably parents and other family members.

Likewise, cultural context further shapes family-based greeting practices. Wood (1994) argues that societal norms influence family interactions, and in Tanzania, ethnic diversity exacerbates

this influence. Among the Sukuma, for example, women often use prolonged, polite greetings to affirm their roles as caregivers, while men's greetings are typically brief, reflecting authority (Kishe, 2003). Parental roles further reinforce these norms, as observed by Lavee and Katz (2002a), with mothers modelling nurturing forms of greeting while fathers emphasise brevity, patterns that children internalise as markers of gendered behaviour.

Literature also finds that communication styles within families further perpetuate these norms. Fagot and Hagan (1991b) suggest that gendered communication impacts self-esteem and behaviour. In Tanzanian households, girls may receive more verbal encouragement in greetings, which fosters emotional expressiveness, while boys are encouraged to be direct, aligning with traditional masculine ideals. As Maccoby (1998) highlights, peer interactions extend these family-taught norms, with children from ethnic groups such as the Maasai reinforcing gender-specific greetings in peer settings, thereby limiting cross-gender interactions.

Furthermore, education systems are critical sites for gender socialisation, including through greeting practices. Sadker and Sadker (2019a) argue that schools reinforce gender norms via teacher expectations and curricula. In Tanzanian schools, teachers often expect girls to use polite, formal greetings, reflecting societal deference norms, while boys may use informal greetings, signalling independence (Swai, 2010). Among the Haya, for instance, classroom greetings often involve girls bowing or using honorifics, while boys are less constrained, perpetuating gendered hierarchies. Educational materials may also reinforce these norms by depicting women as nurturing and men as authoritative in greeting contexts.

In addition, media, including television and advertising, shape perceptions of gender through representations of greetings. Smith and Cook (2021) note that the media often promote stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. In Tanzania, Swahili-language advertisements often feature women using warm, deferential greetings to appeal to family-oriented audiences, while men are depicted using confident, direct greetings (Ngaiza, 2017). These portrayals influence public perceptions, especially among urban ethnic groups such as the Zaramo, where media exposure is high, thereby reinforcing gendered greeting norms.

Moreover, literature demonstrates that religious institutions have a significant influence on gendered greetings in Tanzania, where Christianity, Islam, and traditional beliefs coexist. Sherkat and Darnell (2020b) argue that religious teachings often outline explicit gender roles. In Islamic communities, such as among the Swahili, women are encouraged to use modest greetings, like "*Asalaam Alaikum*," with lowered gazes, thereby reinforcing traditional femininity (Yusuf, 2015). In contrast, Christian greetings among the Nyakyusa may emphasise equality but still reflect gendered expectations, with women using more expressive phrases. These practices embed gender norms within religious greetings across ethnic groups.

Additionally, sports provide another lens for examining gendered greetings. Messner (2017b) suggests that sports reinforce or challenge gender norms through participation and portrayal. In Tanzania, sports like football, which are often dominated by men among groups such as the Hehe, involve brief, assertive greetings that align with traditional masculine ideals. Conversely, women's netball teams, common among the Pare, use cooperative, warm greetings that reflect nurturing stereotypes (Mtui, 2018). These differences highlight how sports-related greetings perpetuate gendered norms across ethnic contexts.

In this regard, social greetings in Tanzania are more than mere courtesies; they serve as powerful mechanisms for gender socialisation, deeply rooted in ethnic and cultural diversity. Across families, schools, media, religion, and sports, greetings reflect and reinforce societal expectations of gender. Sociolinguistic studies, such as Tannen (1990), emphasise that

greetings are performative acts that encode power dynamics and social roles. In Tanzania, with over 120 ethnic groups, these dynamics are shaped uniquely. For example, the deferential greetings of Chagga women contrast with the egalitarian greetings among some Maasai communities, illustrating how ethnic contexts influence gendered norms.

Conclusively, families lay the foundation for gendered greetings, together with schools, media, religion, and sports, which amplify these norms. These are challenged by societal shifts, such as the growing gender equality movements in urban Tanzania, which undermine traditional greeting practices, suggesting potential for change. From a Global South perspective, contemporary views emphasise embodied and linguistic resistance to colonial and patriarchal norms, promoting decolonial epistemologies that foreground southern tactics for challenging sexism in everyday discourse (Singh, 2021). Moreover, the adoption of gender-inclusive language has been advocated as a strategy to reduce cisnormativity and heterosexism, as evidenced in public health communications where neutral terms foster equity and visibility for non-binary and transgender individuals. Nonetheless, recent research underscores the persistence of sexism in language despite global declines in overt sexist attitudes, with studies highlighting how linguistic biases in AI and large language models perpetuate gender stereotypes. This synthesis underscores the need for further research into how greetings can both perpetuate and disrupt gendered norms across Tanzania's diverse ethnic landscape, incorporating these current insights to address lingering sexist structures in language.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a robust theoretical framework that integrates sociolinguistic, feminist, and anthropological perspectives to examine how social greetings in Tanzanian ethnic groups reflect and reinforce gendered norms. The analysis is guided by two complementary theoretical approaches: Judith Butler's (1990) Theory of Gender Performativity and Norman Fairclough's (1989) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Butler's Performativity Theory conceptualises gender as constructed through repeated social acts rather than as an inherent identity. In this context, greetings are treated as performative speech acts that enact and sustain gendered roles. For example, gender-specific greetings in communities such as Chasu, Gogo, and Fipa serve as recurring linguistic practices that reinforce expectations of female deference or male authority, thereby perpetuating gendered hierarchies. Fairclough's CDA, in turn, views discourse as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by power relations and ideologies. Applied here, it reveals how greetings encode gendered power dynamics, for instance, through male-only forms in Sandawe that privilege men by excluding women, while also highlighting cases of relative egalitarianism, such as the gender-neutral greetings found in Sukuma, Rangi, and Hehe communities. These two frameworks complement each other effectively: Performativity explains the ongoing construction of gender through everyday acts, while CDA uncovers the underlying power structures and ideologies embedded in those acts. Together, they provide a multidimensional lens for understanding greetings as sites where gender, culture, ethnicity, and power intersect in Tanzania's diverse sociocultural landscape.

The study employed three interconnected qualitative methods to gather and analyse data from ten Tanzanian ethnic communities. These were Sukuma, Sandawe, Gogo, Rangi, Hehe, Fipa, Matengo, Manda, Nyakyusa, and Chasu. The communities were selected to represent a mix of Bantu and non-Bantu linguistic groups (Maho, 2009) to capture Tanzania's cultural diversity and highlight how greetings function as performative acts that reflect and reinforce gendered norms, as theorised by Butler (1990) and analysed through Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse lens.

The study employed ethnographic observation in naturalistic settings (homes, markets, schools, and religious gatherings) to document everyday greeting practices. Detailed field notes were used to record verbal greetings, physical gestures (e.g., handshakes, bows, kneeling), and contextual factors (e.g., age, gender, social status) with participants' consent. The recorded observations were later transcribed to enable the textual analysis with Nvivo. The method was chosen because it captures nuanced, context-specific behaviours and non-verbal elements that are essential for understanding greetings as performative acts and cannot be fully accessed through interviews alone. In addition, in-depth interview was conducted with 60 participants to gain deeper insight into the cultural meanings and lived experiences of greeting practices. The sample of 60 participants was deemed adequate to capture diverse gendered greeting practices across Tanzania's ten ethnic groups. In qualitative research, such a size ensures thematic saturation and sufficient representation while allowing for in-depth, context-sensitive analysis. Semi-structured interviews were selected to elicit rich, in-depth participant perspectives on the cultural meanings, gendered implications, and lived experiences of greeting practices, complementing observational data and enabling critical interpretation of normative gender dynamics.

Furthermore, discourse analysis was conducted using observational field notes and interview transcripts. Thematic coding with Nvivo, and classification of recurring patterns followed Butler (1990), Fairclough (1989), and Ochs (1988). The ultimate goal was to identify performative elements (e.g., how greetings construct masculinity/femininity), power structures (e.g., male privilege), and indexical meanings (e.g., egalitarian tendencies in neutral forms). By combining ethnographic observation, semi-structured interview, and discourse analysis within a unified theoretical framework, the study provides a comprehensive, rigorous, and context-sensitive examination of greeting practices across diverse Tanzanian communities.

Observations revealed patterned verbal and nonverbal behaviours, such as women's deferential gestures (e.g., kneeling, bowing, or averting gaze) and men's assertive responses (e.g., firm handshakes or nods), that subtly encode hierarchies, often tied to contextual factors such as labour divisions, rituals, or intergenerational dynamics. Interviews provided interpretive depth, with participants articulating how greetings perpetuate role expectations, such as male authority or female nurturance, within urban-rural tensions and cultural preservation efforts.

4 Findings

This section presents the key findings from a multifaceted qualitative dataset, comprising ethnographic observations in naturalistic settings (e.g., homes, markets, schools, and religious gatherings), semi-structured interview with 60 participants across diverse age groups and roles, and a systematic collection of social greeting practices from ten Tanzanian ethnic communities. These were greetings from Sukuma, Sandawe, Gogo, Rangi, Hehe, Fipa, Matengo, Manda, Nyakyusa, and Chasu.

In this sub-section, the paper presents ethnographic observations and participant perceptions from diverse Tanzanian ethnic groups (e.g., Chasu, Gogo, Fipa, Sandawe, Rangi, Hehe, Matengo, Manda, Nyakyusa, Sukuma), illustrating how greeting practices serve as a medium for reflecting and reinforcing gendered norms. The greetings are categorised into three primary types: (1) gender-specific forms addressing men and women, (2) greetings reserved exclusively for men, and (3) gender-neutral greetings. The following subsections present greetings in the studied ethnic communities in relation to their normative gender identities.

4.1 Chasu greetings

The Chasu ethnic language is spoken by the Chasu community residing in Kilimanjaro Region. The community inhabits areas in Mwanga District, Same District, and the Pare Mountains. Maho (2009) classifies the language as part of the Bantu group G, Shambala (G.22). It is estimated that around 530,000 people speak the language. The language has specific greetings reserved for addressing fathers-in-law only, and others for mothers-in-law only. In addition to these specific greetings, there are general greetings and inquiries used more broadly, as illustrated in Figure 1.

General greetings	
A: <i>Namnani?</i>	<i>How are you?</i>
B: <i>Chedi.</i>	<i>Fine.</i>
A: <i>Washinjiadhe?</i>	<i>How is the morning?</i>
B: <i>Chedi.</i>	<i>Fine.</i>
A: <i>Walithehuko?</i>	<i>Is everyone fine?</i>
B: <i>Ndevedi?</i>	<i>They are fine.</i>
Reserved greetings for fathers-in-law	
A: <i>Evava</i>	<i>Oo father (expressing great respect)</i>
B: <i>Evava</i>	<i>Oo father (replicating the great respect)</i>
Reserved greetings for mothers-in-law	
A: <i>Emcheku,</i>	<i>Oo mother (expressing great respect)</i>
B: <i>Eapa,</i>	<i>Oo son-in-law (replicating the great respect)</i>

Figure 1: Chasu, greetings

As shown in Figure 1, the Chasu ethnic language has both special greetings reserved for parents-in-law and general greetings. The special and reserved greetings are only extended to Chasu's parents-in-law. These greetings demonstrate a unique form of respect towards the addressees. General greetings can be used among people of similar or roughly the same age and are applicable regardless of sex.

4.2 Gogo greetings

The Gogo language, also known as Chigogo, is spoken by the Gogo ethnic group in Dodoma. It covers four districts: Chamwino, Chemba, Kongwa, and Mpwapwa. The language is estimated to be spoken by a population of 1,080,000. It is classified by Maho (2009) as G11. In the Gogo language, there are greetings directed to a specific gender, while others are general. As shown in the following figures.

A: *Solowenyu?*
How is the work / How is the day?
 B: *Ale solowenyu*
It is fine. How are you?

Figure 2: Gogo, greetings to men only

A: *Mihanyenyi/mwaswezaa?*
How is the work / How is the day?
 B: *Lyaswaa*
It is fine. We are ok.

Figure 3: Gogo, greetings to women only

A: *mbukwenyi*
how is the morning?
 B: *mbukwa:*
it is fine.
 A: *mulibhaswanu?*
Are you well?
 B: *Chilibhaswanu. Nanye mulibhaswanu?/ nyenye du?*
We are well. Are you also well?
 A: *Chilibhaswanu. Bhana nawo bhaswanu?*
We are well. How are the children?
 B: *Bhaswanu.*
They are all well.
 A: *Mukulya chi? / Chono mukulya?*
What are you eating? / Are you getting your daily bread?
 B: *Chikulya ndigwa. Nyenye chono mukulya?*
We are eating food / We are getting our daily bread.
 A: *Aa Mulungu yakutaza, chikulya ndigwa duu.*
Oh God helps. We are eating food.

Figure 4: Gogo, greetings by the woman to the man

4.3 Fipa (ki-Nkansi) greetings

The Fipa ethnic language is spoken by the Fipa community residing in Rukwa Region. Maho (2009) classifies the language as part of the Bantu group M, Fipa-Mambwe (M.13). It is estimated to be spoken by approximately 713,000 people. The language categorises greetings based on sex. There are greetings specifically addressed to older men and others to older women. When these specific greetings are used, they may take precedence over more general greetings or inquiries. The following figures present a relevant sample of Fipa Greetings related to gender norms.

A: *Aposile akombe?*
Are the parents fine?
 B: *Aposile.*
They are fine.
 A: *Aposile anche?*
Are the children fine?
 B: *Aposile.*
They are fine.
 A: *Yaposile malunga?*
Is the Family fine?
 B: *Yaposile.*
It is fine.

Figure 5: Fipa, general greetings

Greetings addressed to men only are:
 A: *Amu Posuta.*
Good morning
 B: *Tata itu kalesa / mwenewitu kalesa.*
Fine.

Greetings addressed to women only are:
 A: *Amu posuma?*
Good morning
 B: *Tata itu kalesa / mwenewitu kalesa.*
Fine

Figure 6: Fipa, gendered greetings

As shown by Figures 5 and 6, Fipa has specific greetings for an elderly man and an elderly woman. These greetings bestow uncommon respect upon elders of both genders. In light of the purpose of this paper, these unconventional respects highlight the significance of Fipa greetings.

4.4 Sandawe greetings

The Sandawe language is spoken by the Sandawe ethnic group. They live in Dodoma Region, specifically in Chemba and Kondoa districts. The language is estimated to be spoken by about 60,000 people. Maho (2009) classifies it as a language isolate. Sandawe greetings are divided into two types: general and specific. The Sandawe ethnic group has general greetings for everyone but specific greetings for men only. There are also appropriate greetings when a man greets a woman, a woman greets a man, or when women greet each other. The following categories of Sandawe greetings relate to gender norms.

A: *Hikiana* (equivalent to “How are you?”)
 B: *Anga* (equivalent to “Fine”)

Figure 7: Sandawe general greetings

A: <i>Heyu saankhema</i>	(equivalent to “Za saa hizi?”)
B: <i>Pultuma</i>	(equivalent to “it’s ok”)

Figure 8: Sandawe, greetings by the visitor to the host

A: <i>Bokwera mamawa sisinena</i>	(it is an inclusive greeting which asks about all affairs in the household - in a broader sense equivalent to “How are you?”).
B: <i>Mamawa susunga/lhasunga</i>	(in a broader sense equivalent to “Fine” but the addressee would go on explaining everything that has happened before that particular encounter).

Figure 9: Sandawe, neutral greetings

A: (i) <i>Hikina pultamane ware</i>	(sing. addressee) (equivalent to Hi)
	(ii) <i>Hikina pultamane wareksi</i>
	(plur. addressee), (equivalent to Hi)
B: <i>Pultumaga ware</i>	(equivalent to Hi)

Figure 10: Sandawe, man-to-man greetings

After analysing and interpreting Sandawe greetings, the unique or peculiar discovery is that Sandawe social greetings reserve special greetings for men. This further suggests that the Sandawe society gives men particular attention and care, which this paper interprets as a symbol conveyed through Sandawe social greetings.

4.5 Sukuma greetings

The Sukuma language is spoken by the Sukuma ethnic group. According to Ethnologue/SIL International, the Sukuma people are mainly found in several regions. In Mwanza, it is spoken in Ilemela, Misungwi, and Nyamagana districts. In Simiyu, it is spoken in Meatu, Maswa, Busega, and Bariadi districts. In Geita, it is spoken in Nyang’hwale, Mbogwe, Bukombe, and Chato districts. In Shinyanga, it is spoken in Shinyanga District, Kahama District, Kishapu District, Msalala District, Ushetu District, and Shinyanga Municipality. Maho (2009) classifies the language as F21, with an estimated population of 8,130,000. The following is a sample of Sukuma greetings regarding gender norms.

A: <i>Ngw’angaluka baba.</i>	Good morning.
B: <i>Ngw’angaluka baba.</i>	Good morning.
A: <i>Wamisha mphola?</i>	How are you?
B: <i>Mphola du.</i>	We are fine.
A: <i>Bhanigini?</i>	How are the children?
B: <i>Bhalalaga.</i>	They are fine.

Figure 11: Sukuma greetings

As shown in the analysis in Figure 11, Sukuma greetings are not gendered except for the distinction of the addressee, which varies by gender.

4.6 Rangi greetings

The Rangi language is spoken by the Rangi ethnic group, which is found in Dodoma Region, specifically in Kondoa District. The language is estimated to be spoken by approximately 371,000 people. It is classified by Maho (2009) as Nilamba-Rangi F. 33. The following are samples of Rangi greetings that highlight gender norms.

A: <i>Jori muvukire?</i>
<i>How have you waked up?</i>
B: <i>Ntavukire nkansu.</i>
<i>We have waked up well.</i>
A: <i>Vana vako nkansu vari?</i>
<i>Are the children fine?</i>
B: <i>Nkansu vari.</i>
<i>They are fine.</i>
A: <i>Chemhoniri?</i>
<i>What is the situation?</i>
B: <i>Tahoniri mwasu (it is sunny)</i>
„ <i>mbula (there is plenty of rainfall)</i>
„ <i>njala (there is hunger)</i>
„ <i>mwaka mbotu (the year of plenty food)</i>
„ <i>varawiri/murwiri (there are sick people/there is a sick people)</i>

Figure 12: Rangi, morning greetings

A: <i>Jori <u>mkumbiri</u>?</i>
<i>How is the afternoon?</i>
B: <i><u>Nkasu</u>.</i>
<i>It is fine.</i>

Figure 13: Rangi, afternoon greetings

A: <i><u>Tenga metu</u>.</i>
<i>Welcome one again</i>
B: <i><u>Natengire</u>.</i>
<i>Thank you.</i>

Figure 14: Rangi, valediction

In Rangi greetings, there is a fascinating question that demands an answer from any aspect of Rangi social life. The question is: “*Chemhoniri?* (Kuna hali gani?)” This question strongly characterises Rangi greetings. In this paper, the question is viewed as a symbol expressed through the Rangi greetings.

4.7 Hehe greetings

Hehe is an ethnic community language spoken by the Hehe people. The Hehe ethnic group lives in Iringa Region. They can be found in Iringa District, Kilolo District, Mufindi District, and

Iringa Urban District. The language is estimated to be spoken by about 1,210,000 people. It is classified by Maho (2009) in group G, which is Bena-Kinga (G.62). Hehe have greetings used when interactants meet for the first time and those used when they meet for the second time. Their meetings also reflect the time of the day, as presented hereunder.

A: *Jori muvukire?*
How have you waked up?
 B: *Ntavukire nkansu.*
We have waked up well.
 A: *Vana vako nkansu vari?*
Are the children fine?
 B: *Nkansu vari.*
They are fine.
 A: *Chemhoniri?*
What is the situation?
 B: *Tahoniri mwasu (it is sunny)*
 „ *mbula (there is plenty of rainfall)*
 „ *njala (there is hunger)*
 „ *mwaka mbotu (the year of plenty food)*
 „ *varawiri/murwiri (there are sick people/there is a sick people)*

Figure 15: Hehe', morning greetings

If the interactants have not met for a long time, their greetings include a handshake, followed by each person kissing each other's hand.

A: *Whewuli?*
How is the day?
 B: *Whewuli*
It is fine.
 A/B: *Mwahwi?*
How is the day?
 A/B: *Mwahwi yunye / Mwahwi yunye!*
How is the day to you too?

Figure 16: Hehe, afternoon greetings

Hehe, greetings bring another enjoyable experience. For them, the amount of time since the last encounter is of great importance. This is evident in that if the interactants have not met for a long time, they must shake hands and kiss each other's hands. This unique experience, as reflected in the greetings, is considered a symbol of the Hehe ethnic group's greeting customs.

4.8 Matengo greetings

The Matengo ethnic language is spoken by the community living in Ruvuma Region, particularly in Mbinga District. The language is estimated to be used by approximately 271,000 people. It is classified by Maho (2009) in group N, Manda (N.13). Matengo greetings are divided into two categories: morning greetings and afternoon greetings. The following are samples of Matengo greetings in relation to gender norms.

A: *Abhali ya leleno?*
How is the morning?
 B: *Iniae.*
It is fine.
 A: *Nzumwikibhole?*
How have waked up?
 B: *Iniae pena.*
It is fine.

Figure 17: Matengo, morning greetings

A: *Mwangele?*
How is the afternoon?
 B: *Ee mwangele nu.*
It is very fine.

Figure 18: Matengo, afternoon greetings

Matengo greetings are plain greetings. The greetings lack vibrant or distinctive features. Therefore, in this context, they can be described as gender neutral greetings.

4.9 Manda greetings

The Manda ethnic community's language is spoken by the community residing in Njombe Region, particularly in Ludewa District. It is estimated to be spoken by around 43,000 people. Maho (2009) classifies the language as part of the Bantu group N, specifically within the Ruvuma-Mbinga subgroup (N.11). The following are samples of Manda greetings in relation to gender norms.

A: *Mwoniri?*
How is the day?
 B: *Ee nam mwoniri.*
It is fine.
 A: *habari za wenga?*
How are you?
 B: *Sinofu.*
It is fine.
 A: *Habari za vana?*
Are the children fine?
 B: *Vilamo.*
They are fine.

Figure 19: Manda, morning greetings

A: *Mwangele?*
How do you do?
 B: *Ee mwangele nu.*
It's very fine.

Figure 10: Manda, afternoon greetings

Manda greetings are gender neutral language. The greetings lack any vibrant or distinctive features. Therefore, in this paper, they can be described as plain greetings.

4.10 Nyakyusa greetings

The Nyakyusa language is spoken by the Nyakyusa ethnic community. Nyakyusa's population is estimated at approximately 1.2 million people. This population mainly resides in Mbeya Region, particularly in Kyela and Rungwe districts. According to Maho (2009), the Nyakyusa language is classified within the Bantu group M, specifically in the Nyakusa-Ngonde subgroup (M.31).). The following are samples of Manda greetings in relation to gender norms.

A: <i>Mgonile?</i> <i>How are you?</i>
B: <i>Ndaga.</i> <i>Fine.</i>
A: <i>Twambombo?</i> <i>How is the job?</i>
B: <i>Tununu.</i> <i>It is fine.</i>
A: <i>Twakukaja?</i> <i>How is your family?</i>
B: <i>Tununu itolo.</i> <i>It is very fine.</i>

Figure 11: Nyakyusa, morning greetings

A: <i>Mwangele</i> <i>How do you do?</i>
B: <i>Tununu / ena / ndaga.</i> <i>It is fine / it's ok.</i>

Figure 12: Nyakyusa, next meeting greetings

Nyakyusa greetings are also plain ones. They do not show gender distinctions. The greetings lack vibrant or distinctive features. Therefore, in this context, they can also be called gender neutral greetings.

5 Discussion

This section discusses the study's findings within the broader theoretical frameworks of Butler's (1990) *Theory of Gender Performativity* and Fairclough's (1989) *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*. It examines the broader social, cultural, and policy implications of the observed greeting practices. The discussion centres on how social greetings, seemingly routine and polite linguistic acts, function as powerful tools through which normative gender identities are enacted, maintained, and occasionally contested across Tanzania's multi-ethnic landscape.

Across the ten ethnic groups examined, Chasu, Gogo, Fipa, Sandawe, Sukuma, Rangi, Hehe, Matengo, Manda, and Nyakyusa, social greetings emerge as performative acts that both reflect and produce gendered identities. Butler's concept of performativity explains how repetitive speech and gesture constitute the illusion of a stable gender identity. In the Tanzanian context, greetings are part of this repetition: through words, tone, and embodied gestures, individuals enact femininity and masculinity as culturally intelligible performances.

Ethnographic observations illustrate that women's greeting gestures, kneeling, bowing, gaze aversion, or subdued tone, represent a ritualised embodiment of submission and respect. For example, Chasu women greet fathers-in-law with *Evava*, and Gogo women greet male elders with *Solowenyu*, thereby performing femininity through deference and humility. Conversely, men's greetings, characterised by handshakes, nods, or shoulder claps, project dominance and authority, as seen among Sandawe and Rangi men. These contrasting acts align with Butler's assertion that gender is not innate but continuously performed through culturally sanctioned behaviours.

Participant testimonies reinforce this performativity. Statements such as the Sukuma wife's remark that "kneeling to brothers is a symbol of a good Sukuma woman" demonstrate how linguistic and bodily performances are moralised and internalised as measures of proper gender conduct. In this sense, greetings are not neutral exchanges but cultural scripts that teach and legitimate gender roles from early socialisation onward.

From a critical discourse perspective, greetings in Tanzanian ethnic groups serve as mechanisms of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), mediating authority and access to social legitimacy. Fairclough's CDA framework reveals how gendered linguistic differentiation reflects and reinforces power hierarchies. In the Fipa community, the distinction between *Amu Posuta* (for men) and *Amu Posuma* (for women) stratifies authority along gendered lines, while in Sandawe society, the male-exclusive greeting *Hikina pultamane ware* constructs male solidarity and institutionalises women's exclusion from ritual and decision-making spaces.

Even greetings that appear neutral on the surface, such as the Sukuma *Wamisha mphola?* or the Rangi *Jori muvukire?* Carry gendered undertones by linking women's identities to domesticity and care work. Frequent inquiries about children and household well-being reveal how women's social value is linguistically tied to nurturing roles. Men's greetings, conversely, often focus on productivity, labour, or public engagement, reinforcing masculinity as authority and action. Thus, linguistic asymmetry in greetings both reflects and reproduces unequal power relations embedded in social life.

While patriarchal hierarchies persist in traditional greetings, evidence of transformation is emerging. Ethnographic data from urban and interethnic contexts show that younger generations, especially women, are reinterpreting traditional greetings to align with modern egalitarian values. For instance, in Dodoma, young people consciously reject or modify deferential greetings, viewing them as "outdated." Some adopt Swahili or English greetings to signal modernity and neutrality, thereby disrupting the linguistic reproduction of hierarchy.

These shifts illustrate what Butler (1990) terms *subversive performativity*: the potential for repetition to produce variation and resistance. The same greetings that historically reinforced subordination can be re-performed to signify equality and mutual respect. A female Sandawe teacher's statement, "In school, I teach neutrality, but village greetings contradict," exemplifies this tension between inherited tradition and emerging linguistic agency.

Ethnographic and interview evidence confirms that greetings function as intergenerational sites of gender socialisation. Children observe, imitate, and internalise gendered patterns of greeting within families and community settings, a process consistent with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. The observations of Chasu children mimicking adults' bowed greetings and Fipa children using gender-specific salutations show how linguistic performance is a learned behaviour that reproduces patriarchal norms.

As Lavee and Katz (2002a) note, parental roles further reinforce these dynamics—mothers model nurturing and elaborate greetings, while fathers emphasise brevity and authority. Such modelling teaches children that care and submission are feminine virtues, while control and restraint are masculine ideals. Through daily repetition, greetings thus become linguistic vehicles through which gender ideologies are passed down and normalised.

The findings highlight that greetings, though culturally diverse, share a common function across Tanzania's ethnic groups: the reproduction of social order through gendered respect. This reinforces what Radcliffe-Brown (1952) described as the role of ritual in maintaining societal structure. However, greetings also reveal how power is negotiated and potentially reconfigured. As younger Tanzanians navigate modernity, education, and digital communication, traditional greetings increasingly coexist with alternative, egalitarian forms of expression.

This tension between preservation and transformation carries significant implications for gender relations. On one hand, the persistence of gendered greetings illustrates the endurance of patriarchal ideology embedded in language. On the other hand, the emergence of neutral or hybrid greetings reflects a gradual deconstruction of gender binaries and the rise of new communicative ethics rooted in equality.

The implications of these findings extend beyond linguistic theory into practical domains of social policy and education.

In the first place, there are educational implications. Schools serve as important sites for linguistic socialisation. Incorporating critical language awareness into curricula can help teachers and students recognise how everyday expressions reproduce inequality. Gender-inclusive greeting practices should be modelled and encouraged within classrooms to promote mutual respect without reinforcing subordination.

Secondly, there are cultural Policy implications. National and regional cultural policies should acknowledge linguistic diversity while promoting gender equity in cultural preservation programs. Efforts to document indigenous languages must include gender-sensitive analyses to ensure that cultural safeguarding does not inadvertently preserve patriarchal norms.

Thirdly, there are media and public discourse. Media representations can play a transformative role by modelling inclusive linguistic forms. Television, radio, and social media campaigns that use gender-neutral greetings can subtly influence public attitudes and normalise equality-oriented discourse.

Lastly, there are community and religious engagement. Community dialogues and interfaith initiatives can foster culturally grounded reinterpretations of respectful language that affirm dignity without hierarchy. Encouraging reinterpretations rather than erasures ensures that reform is locally meaningful and sustainable.

Theoretically, this study advances gender and language scholarship in three key ways. First, it demonstrates that in African sociolinguistic contexts, performative language acts, such as greetings, are fundamental to understanding how gender is constructed and sustained through everyday discourse. Second, it highlights that the intersection of language, power, and identity is best understood through an integrated framework combining performativity and critical discourse analysis. Third, it underscores the potential of ordinary communicative acts as spaces

for both the reproduction and transformation of gender norms, offering an alternative to Western-centric models of linguistic sexism by foregrounding African ethnolinguistic realities.

To sum up, social greetings across Tanzania's ethnic communities operate as complex discursive sites where gender, culture, and power intersect. They serve both to reproduce patriarchal ideologies and, increasingly, to challenge them through generational reinterpretation. The implications of these findings reach into education, cultural preservation, and social policy, affirming that linguistic transformation can play a pivotal role in advancing gender equality. Recognising greetings as performative and ideological acts reframes them not as static traditions but as evolving social instruments through which Tanzanians can negotiate identity, respect, and equity in an ever-changing multicultural society. The greetings mirror cultural hierarchies through documented behaviours, such as women's deferential gestures (e.g., bowing or kneeling in Chasu homes and Gogo water-fetching rituals, as in observations 1, 3, 11) and men's assertive responses (e.g., firm nods or handshakes in Fipa churches and Sandawe councils, observations 5, 7). Perceptions echo this, with participants viewing greetings as identity markers (e.g., a female Sukuma wife noting kneeling symbolises "a good Sukuma woman," perception 21), highlighting deep-rooted expectations of female submission and male authority in patrilineal, agrarian, and spiritual contexts across Tanzania's multicultural landscape.

Through repetitive enactment, these practices perpetuate norms via performativity (Butler, 1990), as seen in exclusive male greetings excluding women in Sandawe (observations 7–10) or gendered care roles in neutral forms (e.g., Rangi situational inquiries tying women to nurturance, observation 12; Manda child-focused questions, perception 30). Urban-rural tensions (e.g., youth resistance in Gogo schools, observation 4) suggest potential change. However, daily rituals in varied settings, homes, and markets naturalise asymmetries, sustaining patriarchal power dynamics in Bantu and non-Bantu groups amid ethnic diversity.

6 Conclusion

This study explored how social greeting practices across ten Tanzanian ethnic communities, Chasu, Gogo, Fipa, Sandawe, Sukuma, Rangi, Hehe, Matengo, Manda, and Nyakyusa, reflect and reproduce normative gender identities. Through the integration of ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis, guided by Butler's (1990) *Theory of Gender Performativity* and Fairclough's (1989) *Critical Discourse Analysis*, the study has demonstrated that social greetings are far more than routine linguistic exchanges. They are ritualised and performative acts that simultaneously mirror and manufacture gendered subjectivities, reinforcing the power relations that define Tanzanian social life. The findings revealed that greetings across the studied communities consistently operate as *performative mechanisms* through which gender norms are enacted, legitimised, and transmitted. In patriarchal societies such as those of the Chasu, Gogo, Fipa, and Sandawe, greeting rituals are overtly gendered, linguistically and bodily, reinforcing asymmetrical hierarchies between men and women. The Chasu greeting *Evava*, accompanied by bowing or kneeling to a father-in-law, and the Gogo greeting *Solowenyu*, expressed with lowered gaze, exemplify the performative construction of femininity as submission and respect. The Sandawe male-exclusive greeting *Hikina pultamane ware* institutionalises male dominance by denying women linguistic participation in certain social domains. Conversely, greetings among the Sukuma, Rangi, Hehe, Matengo, Manda, and Nyakyusa appear linguistically neutral yet remain ideologically loaded. These "plain" greetings, such as the Rangi *Jori muvukire?* or the Manda *Habari za vana?* Frequently focus on family, child care, or domestic concerns, discursive patterns that subtly

align women with nurturing roles. Thus, even neutral linguistic forms contribute to gender differentiation by indexing social expectations of care and responsibility. Across these communities, ethnographic observations and participants' reflections illustrate how greetings act as both *rituals of respect* and *technologies of gender*. The repetition of deference acts, kneeling, bowing, or averting the gaze, solidifies gendered hierarchies, while their consistent association with moral virtue reinforces gendered expectations as cultural ideals. A female Sukuma participant's statement that "kneeling to brothers is a symbol of a good Sukuma woman" and a male Fipa elder's claim that "greetings encode our power" capture the internalised nature of gender performance as both personal identity and communal obligation. Ultimately, this study concludes that social greetings in Tanzania are both *mirrors* and *makers* of gendered social reality. They mirror existing hierarchies by codifying deference, respect, and authority through linguistic and bodily performance, yet they also make those hierarchies tangible by enacting them in daily life. In their repetition, greetings transform abstract gender ideologies into lived experience. However, the presence of contestation, especially among younger generations and urban speakers, signals that gender performativity is not fixed but fluid. As greetings evolve through linguistic innovation and cross-cultural contact, they carry the potential to shift from reproducing inequality to fostering mutual recognition and dignity. The path toward gender justice in Tanzania's multilingual and multicultural society may therefore begin with transforming the simplest of acts, the greeting. When greetings become inclusive expressions of respect rather than instruments of subordination, they can model a language of equality that transcends gender, age, and status. Through such subtle yet profound shifts, Tanzanian communities can preserve the cultural richness of their traditions while reimagining the everyday discourse of respect as a foundation for a more equitable future.

7 References

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