

MEANING LOSS IN KISWAHILI–LUTSOTSO INTERPRETATION DURING CHURCH SERVICES

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Abstract

The application of language in the church communication may be highly significant especially in sermons, prayers as well as liturgy. However, there is a very big problem of interpretation between the Kiswahili, the liturgical language used and the Lutsotso language, which most congregants use. The present study addressed the issue of meaning loss in Kiswahili-Lutsotso interpretation in the church services through the Pragmatic Model of Simultaneous Interpretation proposed by Martha Tirkkonen-Condit (1989). The discussion reveals that Kiswahili has many theological and biblical phrases which have no direct Lutsotso equivalents. Consequently, estimations, borrowings, or simplified translations are adopted by interpreters, which does not only weaken the correctness of the dogma, but also kills the power of rhetoric and the figurative message. This meaninglessness is not only affecting the understandings, but also defines the way the congregants build theological knowledge, and the problem of inclusivity and power in church speech. The study has its implications on various stakeholders. It provides meaning to the policymakers who regard the minority languages like Lutsotso important in the religious and the overall arenas to promote equality in access to knowledge of spirituality. It emphasizes to the linguists the need to have liturgical lexicons and bigger account of underrepresented languages so as to bring about a reduction of semantic gaps. Religious organizations and interpreters are the cases where the outcomes can demonstrate the significance of the specialized training that is both theologically and practically competent. Lastly, to the local communities, the research confirms the relevance of culture-based translation practices. Tackling the meaning loss can thus improve inclusiveness, protection of cultural identity, and guarantee transfer of religious messages at the Kiswahili-Lutsotso church settings.

Keywords: Church communication; Inclusivity; Interpretation; Kiswahili-Lutsotso; Meaning loss

Introduction

The question of meaning loss in church interpretation has received growing attention in African contexts, yet the problem remains far from resolved. In western Kenya, Kiswahili serves as the national and liturgical language in most churches, while Lutsotso, a dialect of Oluluhya in the Bantu branch of the Niger–Congo family, dominates everyday communication (Simango, 2022). This linguistic duality sets the stage for recurring struggles in interpretation during sermons, prayers, and liturgical practices. The issue is not merely linguistic—it strikes at the heart of theological fidelity and spiritual experience.

When messages move from Kiswahili into Lutsotso, the task is not only to transfer words but to preserve their doctrinal weight, rhetorical force, and spiritual resonance.

Although the challenge appears straightforward, existing scholarship reveals deeper complications. Studies of African church interpretation repeatedly note that real-time delivery exacerbates the risk of meaning loss, since interpreters cannot consult resources or revise as translators of written texts can (Njeru & Wafula, 2021). The problem intensifies when theological metaphors or doctrinal terms lack equivalents in the target language, producing

diluted or distorted versions of Scripture (van Rooy, 2021). Yet these studies often remain descriptive, cataloguing instances of mistranslation without explaining why such distortions persist despite long-standing recognition of the problem.

Attempts to classify meaning loss into “inevitable” versus “preventable” categories highlight another unresolved tension. While structural and cultural differences across languages account for some loss, other failures stem from insufficient interpreter training or lack of theological literacy (Chibamba, 2022). However, this binary framing risks oversimplifying the complexity of live interpretation, where the boundary between what is “inevitable” and “preventable” is blurred. For instance, metaphors that appear linguistically untranslatable may be rendered more effectively if interpreters possess deep cultural knowledge or theological awareness—a nuance that current research tends to overlook.

Recent studies show that the problem of meaning loss in church interpretation across African contexts is both ongoing and complex, exposing the weaknesses of older descriptive approaches. Alawode (2024), in his analysis of Yoruba–English biblical translation, demonstrates that achieving lexical equivalence does not automatically secure doctrinal resonance. He shows that when central Christian metaphors are translated into Yoruba idioms, their interpretive weight often shifts, reshaping the theological message. His findings make it clear that theological fidelity cannot be judged only in terms of words but must also consider the cultural and doctrinal frameworks in which interpretation takes place. In a similar vein, Onyango (2022) examines church interpretation practices in Busia County, where untrained volunteer interpreters frequently distort theological vocabulary. Although strategies like paraphrasing and simplification were intended to make sermons more accessible, Onyango shows that they often led to doctrinal dilution. His work highlights the pressing need for professionalization and structured theological training in church interpretation.

Across these different contexts, both

studies agree that cultural knowledge and theological literacy are just as important as linguistic skill. Yet they also reveal a persistent gap: the lack of effective models that integrate these dimensions into real-time interpreter training. Mutunda (2021) adds to this concern by comparing church interpreting with legal and medical settings. He notes that the unidirectional, sermon-centered mode of church delivery magnifies the consequences of error. Unlike medical or legal interpreting, where clarifications are possible, the church interpreter speaks with unshared authority, making even minor distortions doctrinally weighty. More recently, studies by Simango (2022) and Chibamba (2023) have drawn attention to the new pressures created by digital and hybrid worship. Here, interpretation is shaped not only by language but also by technology. These studies suggest that during the pandemic, livestreamed services forced interpreters to balance theological precision with the demands of multimodal delivery, challenging older assumptions about whether meaning loss is inevitable or preventable.

Taken together, this body of work makes it clear that the crisis of meaning loss is not confined to any single language pair. Instead, it reflects deeper structural, cultural, and pedagogical shortcomings in African church interpretation. Still, a key gap remains: while recent studies recognize the limitations of lexical equivalence and the risks posed by untrained interpreters, few have examined in depth how semantic and pragmatic meaning loss interacts with cultural worldviews and theological performance in specific indigenous contexts. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on Kiswahili–Lutsotso interpretation, arguing that the issue must be reframed beyond the narrow concern of equivalence to include theological literacy, cultural hermeneutics, and the performative nature of religious language in live worship.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design, guided by the principles of discourse-pragmatic analysis. The aim was not to generate statistical generalizations but to gain a deeper understanding of how meaning is conveyed, reshaped, or at times

lost when Kiswahili sermons are interpreted into Lutsotso during church services. To capture this process in its fullness, the research drew on naturalistic observation, audio recordings, and semi-structured interviews. These methods made it possible to examine not only the linguistic strategies of interpreters but also the perspectives of pastors and congregants who experienced the interpreted sermons.

The research took place in selected Christian churches in Kakamega County, Western Kenya. In these settings, Kiswahili is typically used for preaching, while Lutsotso serves as the medium of interpretation for the congregation. The participants consisted of five interpreters and four pastors who were purposively selected because of their active involvement in bilingual preaching. Their experiences and roles offered rich and reliable insights into church interpretation practices. Data collection unfolded in three main ways. First, ten church services were recorded over a period of two months. These recordings captured live sermons in Kiswahili alongside their Lutsotso interpretations, providing the core material for analysis. Second, the researcher attended the services as a participant observer, taking field notes to document non-verbal cues, congregational reactions, and interactional dynamics that recordings alone might miss. Finally, semi-structured interviews were held with pastors, interpreters, and a few congregants. These conversations offered clarification on interpretive decisions, highlighted perceived challenges, and shed light on the doctrinal implications of translation choices.

Analysis was carried out within a qualitative discourse-analytic framework, enriched by concepts from translation studies and pragmatics. The recorded sermons were transcribed and examined line by line, comparing the Kiswahili source texts with their Lutsotso renditions. The analysis paid special attention to theological metaphors, doctrinal expressions, and semantic shifts. Cases of meaning loss were grouped into four categories: metaphoric reduction, doctrinal distortion, semantic narrowing, and avertable loss. To ensure reliability, instances that appeared problematic were cross-checked with pastors and

interpreters during interviews. In this way, the study employed a form of triangulation—combining textual analysis with interview data—while maintaining its overall qualitative orientation. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the process. Permission to record services was sought and obtained from church leaders, and all participants gave informed consent. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used in transcriptions and in the reporting of findings.

Results and Discussions

Loss of Meaning in Kiswahili–Lutsotso Interpretation During Church Services

Loss of meaning in interpretation happens when a word, phrase, or sentence loses its force, nuance, or effectiveness as it moves from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL). This is especially acute in church settings where biblical and theological concepts are woven into deep semantic, cultural, and spiritual layers. In Kiswahili–Lutsotso interpretation, then, it's not enough just to translate correctly; the message must still carry its power to inspire, convict, comfort, and transform. Recent work on Christian translation confirms that many vernacular renditions fall short—congregants report hearing diluted or distorted messages when metaphorical or doctrinal language is handled without theological sensitivity (Alawode, 2024).

The notion of “equivalence” or “correspondence”—aiming for translations that allow TL audiences to experience an impact close to that of SL audiences—remains central in translation theory. Yet research since 2020 increasingly shows that equivalence often breaks down in doctrinal and metaphorical terms when interpreters lack strong theological training or cultural awareness. For example, in *Strategies of Achieving Pragmatic Equivalence in Interpreter-mediated Sermons: Insights from a Group of Churches in Busia County, Kenya* (2022), interpreters frequently used strategies like paraphrasing, borrowing, adaptation to compensate for gaps, but doctrinal terms often lost precision in the process (Mahero, 2024). These kinds of distortions are not trivial slip-ups: errors in spiritual imagery, metaphors, or doctrine shape

how people worship, pray, understand salvation, and orient their lives in faith.

What emerges clearly is that loss of meaning in church interpretation is not inevitable—it is often preventable. Problems tend to arise when interpreters focus on superficial lexical matches or prioritize linguistic fluency without attending to theological depth. To counteract this, interpreters need more than bilingual skill. They need theological grounding and cultural sensitivity. Inadequate language and biblical knowledge, the use of complex terminologies, insufficient preparation, and lack of cultural alignment were identified as key causes of mistranslation (Khachula, 2022). Also, frameworks such as equivalence theory can be productively combined with relevance or contextual strategies (attention to audience expectation, culture) to preserve both meaning and impact. If these measures are adopted, congregations are much more likely to receive preaching that is both understandable and spiritually formative rather than diluted or distorted.

Example 1: Theological Metaphors

Preacher (Kiswahili): *Yesu ni mwanga wa ulimwengu.*

Interpreter (Lutsotso): *Yesu ni taamu ta buuli.* (*Jesus is the lamp of the village.*)

In this case *mwanga wa ulimwengu* (light of the world) is altered as a household metaphor (lamp of the village). Though the lamps lighten up, the anguish of cosmicity of the term world (*ulimwengu*) is diminished to a village in the area, which diminishes the theological magnification of the universal role of Christ (cf. Larson, 1998). The central theme in this text is the metaphor *mwanga wa ulimwengu* (“light of the world”) which is a theological concept describing the universal importance of Christ and his redemptive work. Scripture uses this term to underscore the role of Christ as the divine light that is available to all humans regardless of cultural, geographical or temporal limits. The interpreter, however, localized the metaphor to *taamu ta buuli* (“lamp of the village”) and changed its sensibility into cosmic

and universal to domestic and parochial.

Even though both light and lamp have the connotation of being lit up, the theological magnificence of the initial phrase is lost with the substitution of world with village. What was meant to confirm the Christ of the world, the all-encompassing role is redefined as a smaller and more regionalized presence. This reduction, deprives the metaphor of its universal appeal, which may be influencing the congregants to view Jesus as a savior who is pertinent only to the immediate community, and not as a savior of the entire world (cf. Larson, 1998). This misrepresentation portrays the dangers of domestication of theological metaphors in oral interpretation. Although the interpreter has a desire to advance the expression to the culturally-known, it will unintentionally undermine the accuracy of the doctrine. In this case, the metaphor was not incapable of description; Lutsotso is able to express the concepts of world and light in a sufficient level. Village versus world replacement is therefore an unwarranted interpretive step compared to a linguistic step. There are deep theological implications. Eschatological and missionary implications of the metaphor of Christ as the light of the world states that he is the universal redeemer whose arrival is the light to all. By making it a village magnitude interpreter had also reduced the quantity of doctrinal authority and teaching impact and perhaps suppressed the manner the congregants accept the universality of the mission of Christ.

When interpreting the Bible in church settings, it is essential to treat biblical metaphors with great care. These images are not simply poetic flourishes; they carry deep theological truths that give shape to Christian faith and doctrine. If mishandled, they risk losing their richness and, worse still, altering how believers understand key teachings. Scholars remind us that metaphors in Scripture should be seen as powerful vehicles of meaning rather than decorative language (Stibbe, 2021; Sánchez, 2023). This means that interpreters cannot stop at simply transferring words from one language to another—they must engage in thoughtful interpretation that keeps the conceptual depth of the original text alive.

To do this well, interpreters need two kinds of expertise: strong linguistic skills and sound theological grounding. Without training in biblical hermeneutics, it becomes easy to replace biblical metaphors with culturally familiar but doctrinally shallow expressions. Such substitutions may sound relatable but often weaken the theological message. Take the example of Christ as the “light of the world.” If this metaphor is simplified into a culturally limited phrase, it risks stripping away its fuller meaning—its vision of salvation, hope, and eschatology. In this way, an interpreter does not just lose words but alters the congregation’s understanding of who Christ is. Faithful interpretation, then, calls for balance. On one hand, it must resonate with the cultural setting of the audience; on the other, it must remain faithful to the theological depth of the original message. Recent studies in translation show that equivalence in sacred texts involves more than matching words—it requires attention to how meaning functions doctrinally and culturally (Ukpong, 2021; Lee, 2024). By keeping this balance, interpreters can ensure that biblical metaphors remain both accessible and profound, transmitting their grandeur without distortion.

Example 2: Core Doctrines of Resurrection

Preacher (Kiswahili): *Yesu alishinda kifo na akafufuka.*

Interpreter (Lutsotso): *Yesu yahula lifwa ne nasinjira. (Jesus fought with death and stood up.)*

The phrase *akafufuka* (resurrected) is weakened to *nasinjira* (stood up). Resurrection, as a doctrinal cornerstone of Christianity, signifies triumph over death and divine glorification, not mere physical movement. The interpretive reduction strips the theological depth, leaving congregants with a diluted concept of resurrection (Mbiti, 1990). In this rendering, the key theological term *akafufuka* (“resurrected”) was weakened to *nasinjira* (“stood up”). While the latter conveys the idea of physical rising, it fails to capture the doctrinal depth of resurrection as understood in Christian theology. Resurrection is not simply the act of standing or regaining posture; it is a profound declaration of victory over death, the inauguration of new life,

and divine glorification. By reducing the concept to mere bodily movement, the interpreter stripped away the spiritual and eschatological dimensions central to the Christian faith.

The resurrection of Jesus occupies a central place in Christian theology, embodying both the triumph over death and the assurance of eternal life. In African Christianity, this doctrine carries particular weight, shaping how believers understand suffering, hope, and renewal (Tiéno, 2021; Ndlovu, 2023). Any distortion of this message in interpretation, therefore, risks weakening one of the core convictions of the faith. In the case examined here, the interpreter’s choice of words inadvertently reduced the resurrection from a climactic, hope-giving event to a mundane transition, stripping it of its doctrinal depth and existential power. Unlike concepts that may resist direct equivalence across languages, the idea of resurrection is translatable into Lutsotso through either lexical precision or explanatory strategies. Its dilution, then, reflects not the limits of the language but rather inadequate theological awareness or insufficient mastery of doctrinal vocabulary. This highlights the vulnerability of oral interpretation, where even subtle shifts in lexical choices can radically alter theological meaning (Omenyo, 2022).

When the resurrection is flattened into a symbol of mere personal restoration, congregants may internalize a reduced vision of Christian hope—one that emphasizes social or material recovery over God’s definitive victory over death. The theological and pastoral consequences are significant. Believers shaped by such interpretations may begin to view the resurrection as symbolic of temporary relief rather than as the foundation of eschatological hope, salvation, and final judgment (Kanyoro, 2021). Such narrowing erodes both doctrinal coherence and the lived experience of faith.

Example 3: The Holy Spirit and Semantic Ambiguity

Preacher (Kiswahili): *Roho Mtakatifu atawafariji.*

Interpreter (Lutsotso): *Omwoyo omulayi alabaheresia amani. (The good spirit will give you strength.)*

The translation of *Roho Mtakatifu* (Holy Spirit) as “good spirit” risks conflating Christian doctrine with Lutsotso indigenous cosmology, where ancestral or benevolent spirits exist. This results in semantic ambiguity and doctrinal confusion, obscuring the central Trinitarian concept of Christianity (Walls, 1996). At first glance, the Lutsotso rendering may appear harmless or even positive. However, a closer examination reveals that the phrase *omwoyo omulayi* (“good spirit”) introduces semantic ambiguity that obscures the preacher’s intended meaning. The term *Roho Mtakatifu* refers specifically to the third person of the Christian Trinity, a central figure in Christian doctrine responsible for guidance, comfort, and empowerment. By translating this as “good spirit,” the interpreter inadvertently shifted the meaning toward a more generic category that could be associated with benevolent or ancestral spirits recognized within Lutsotso cosmology.

This imprecision creates a serious theological problem. Whereas *Roho Mtakatifu* denotes a distinct, non-substitutable identity within Christian theology, *good spirit* blurs doctrinal boundaries, potentially leading congregants to associate the comfort promised by Christ with traditional spiritual entities rather than the Trinitarian God. As Walls (1996) notes, the introduction of ambiguity in the translation of core theological terms risks undermining the distinctiveness of the Christian message when expressed in African languages. The challenge in this case is not one of linguistic untranslatability. Lutsotso, like many African languages, has the capacity to accommodate the concept of the Holy Spirit through borrowing, adaptation, or systematic doctrinal teaching. The misrepresentation instead arises from the interpreter’s lack of theological grounding and insufficient awareness of the doctrinal precision

required by such a central term. This makes the loss preventable rather than inevitable, yet the consequences for congregational understanding are profound. Where believers already navigate the coexistence of Christian faith and indigenous cosmologies, ambiguous renderings risk reinforcing syncretic interpretations in which the Holy Spirit becomes conflated with, or even subordinated to, ancestral spirits (Kagama & Nthamburi, 2021; Ndlovu, 2023). Such shifts weaken Trinitarian theology and reshape how Christians perceive the presence and agency of God in their lives.

This underscores the importance of interpreter training that goes beyond vocabulary acquisition to embrace theological literacy. Doctrinally sensitive concepts—such as the Trinity, Christology, and pneumatology—require careful mediation to safeguard their integrity (Gitau, 2022). Collaboration between interpreters, preachers, and theologians is therefore essential in ensuring that the chosen terms are both culturally intelligible and theologically precise. Where semantic ambiguity is left unchecked, as in rendering *Roho Mtakatifu* simply as a “good spirit,” the result is not cultural adaptation but theological erosion, as core aspects of Christian teaching risk being reshaped by local categories of meaning (Phiri, 2022; Lee, 2024). The case illustrates that precision in interpreting doctrinally charged terms is not optional but vital. In multilingual church settings, fidelity to the theological weight of such words preserves both the clarity of doctrine and the integrity of the gospel message. Failure to do so risks not only semantic confusion but also a gradual reshaping of Christian identity itself.

Example 4: Healing and Semantic Narrowing
Preacher (Kiswahili): *Mungu atawaponya magonjwa yenu yote.*

Interpreter (Lutsotso): *Nyasaye alabahonia amakakha kenywe kosi. (God will cure all your wounds.)*

Here, *magonjwa* (illnesses/diseases) is reduced to *amakakha* (physical wounds). The holistic notion of divine healing—encompassing spiritual, emotional, and chronic conditions—is lost. The

congregation thus interprets God's healing power as restricted to visible injuries, diminishing the broader biblical promise (Sanneh, 2009). In this instance, the Kiswahili word *magonjwa* refers broadly to illnesses and diseases, covering a wide range of conditions—physical, psychological, emotional, and even spiritual. The interpreter, however, narrowed the meaning to *amakakha* (wounds), which refers exclusively to visible, external injuries. This semantic reduction stripped the message of its intended breadth and depth, confining divine healing to physical injuries while excluding the fuller biblical scope of restoration. Theologically, narrowing the meaning of *magonjwa* to “wounds” weakens the holistic vision of healing presented in Scripture. In both the Old and New Testaments, divine healing encompasses far more than physical recovery; it speaks to emotional restoration, spiritual liberation, and even communal or national renewal (Banda, 2021; Ndlovu, 2023). By limiting *magonjwa* to surface injuries, the interpreter inadvertently restricted congregants' understanding of God's healing power, reducing it to physical relief rather than the comprehensive renewal promised in the biblical narrative. As Sanneh (2009) reminds us, translation in Christian contexts is never a neutral act—it actively shapes how believers perceive the scope of God's action in their lives (Phiri, 2022).

This case illustrates how semantic narrowing, when preventable, produces serious theological and pastoral consequences. The problem here was not the absence of a faithful equivalent in Lutsotso but the interpreter's choice of a restricted rendering, likely stemming from limited vocabulary or inadequate theological grounding. Such interpretive errors diminish congregational knowledge and reshape religious experience. For believers dealing with chronic illness, emotional trauma, or spiritual struggle, hearing a narrowed message may prevent them from identifying themselves within the promise of holistic healing, undermining the comfort and assurance that Scripture seeks to provide (Gitau, 2022). Over time, repeated constrictions of meaning risk eroding the congregation's grasp of biblical wholeness, rendering the gospel less

transformative and less relevant to lived realities. The case underscores the critical importance of interpretive accuracy when handling theological concepts that intersect directly with human experience. Interpreter training must therefore extend beyond linguistic competence to include theological literacy and sensitivity to doctrinal nuance. Safeguards such as collaboration with pastors, systematic study of scriptural key terms, and intentional reflection on how concepts like healing, salvation, and grace function in biblical theology are essential (Kagama & Nthamburi, 2021; Lee, 2024). In this way, interpreters can communicate the richness of the gospel faithfully, ensuring that its promises resonate deeply and remain transformative for their audiences.

Avertable Loss in Interpretation

Avertable loss of interpretation is a term that is used to describe those situations where the meaning is lost not due to innate structural or lexical differences between two languages: the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), but rather because of the incompetence of the interpreter to provide exact equivalents (Gile, 2009; Pöchhacker, 2016). This kind of loss is usually caused by lack of vocabulary, lack of sufficient competence in both Kiswahili and Lutsotso, or irresponsible manipulation of linguistic and syntactic forms (Nida and Taber, 1982). It can as well be when the interpreters are under pressure, especially in situations where time lag is minimized, requiring the linguistic content to be processed and transferred hastily, leading to miscues (Setton and Dawrant, 2016). In the context of church interpretation, such a loss is especially acute since doctrines, theology, and pastoralism are significant in sermons (Walls, 2002). Misinterpretations can lead to biblical misrepresentations, mislead the congregants, or demean the preacher.

Example 5: Misinterpretation of Biblical Imagery

In one Kakamega church service, the preacher proclaimed:

Preacher (P): “Yesu ni nguzo ya wokovu wetu” (Jesus is the pillar of our salvation).

Interpreter (I): “Yesu niye inzu yosi” (Jesus is the whole house).

Here, the metaphor *nguzo* (“pillar”) highlights Christ as the foundation and support of faith. The interpreter, however, generalized it to “house,” thereby weakening the theological emphasis by shifting the image from foundational strength to general shelter. This shift constitutes avertable loss since it alters doctrinal precision (Nida, 1964). In this example, the preacher’s metaphor deliberately emphasized *nguzo* (“pillar”), an image drawn from architectural structures to signify strength, stability, and foundational support. Within Christian theology, the phrase underscores Christ’s role as the sustaining force of salvation, comparable to a pillar that upholds a building. By rephrasing this as “house,” the interpreter broadened the metaphor into a more general image of shelter. While still positive, the shift diluted the intended theological emphasis, moving from a specific symbol of foundational strength to a vague notion of protection. Such misrepresentation exemplifies what Nida (1964) classifies as avertable loss. Unlike cases where direct equivalents are lacking, the term *nguzo* could have been rendered faithfully in Lutsotso. The error therefore stemmed from a lack of interpretive precision or inadequate sensitivity to the theological weight carried by biblical imagery.

Biblical metaphors function as compact vessels of meaning, compressing complex doctrinal truths into images that resonate both intellectually and experientially. Their pedagogical power lies in their ability to make abstract theological realities tangible. When such metaphors are altered or generalized, however, the depth of the message is compromised. In the case at hand, rendering Christ as “the whole house” rather than “the pillar” risks obscuring the preacher’s intended emphasis: that salvation is upheld and sustained by Christ just as a structure relies on its pillar for stability. This interpretive shift subtly weakens the image of Christ’s indispensability and centrality in sustaining the believer’s salvation.

The consequences extend beyond mere semantics. Metaphors are integral to how congregants internalize doctrine; vivid imagery helps anchor theological truths in memory and practice (Waweru, 2021; Sánchez, 2023). When

these images are diluted, their pedagogical force diminishes, leaving believers with less robust conceptualizations of core doctrines. Over time, repeated misrepresentation risks reshaping doctrinal understanding, softening strong affirmations of Christ’s role into vague or less precise formulations (Gitau, 2022). Such outcomes illustrate how interpretation is never neutral but actively shapes the theology that communities live by.

This highlights an urgent need for interpreters to possess not only linguistic fluency but also theological sensitivity and literary competence in handling biblical metaphors. Metaphors demand careful preservation because they are doctrinally loaded and spiritually formative (Ndlovu, 2023). Formal training that integrates biblical hermeneutics, metaphor theory, and collaborative engagement with preachers can safeguard against interpretive drift. By doing so, interpreters ensure that the imagery of Scripture retains its full doctrinal force and continues to shape congregational faith in transformative ways (Lee, 2024).

Example 6: Mis-rendering of Eschatological Terms

Another example occurred when the preacher declared:

P: “*Tutafufuliwa siku ya mwisho*” (We shall be resurrected on the last day).

I: “*Khwitsa okhulakhulwa inyanga yalifwa*” (We shall be released on the day of death).

The Kiswahili word *siku ya mwisho* literally translates as the eschatological last day in John 6:39-40. The interpreter skewed the fundamental Christian eschatology by translating it as day of death hence the meaning was no longer collective resurrection but individual death (Mbiti, 1990). In this case, the issue is the fact that the interpreter replaces *siku ya mwisho* (the last day) with *inyanga yalifwa* (the day of death). *Siku ya mwisho* is explicitly used in the bible, especially in John 6:39-40 and it means the end of time or eschatological last day, the collective resurrection of believers that will take place at the end of time. Through paraphrasing it as the day of death, the interpreter altered the meaning of the universal,

hope in the future to a personal moment of death.

This misrepresentation is not a superficial semantic slip; it strikes at the very heart of Christian eschatology. The doctrine of resurrection emphasizes collective renewal and vindication of believers at the end of time, whereas “day of death” reduces the scope to personal mortality. This interpretive shift narrows the eschatological horizon, distorting one of Christianity’s most central promises. As Mbiti (1990) rightly observed, African Christianity is deeply rooted in eschatological hope, and any weakening of that hope compromises the integrity of doctrine and the spiritual imagination of believers. Recent studies confirm this point, noting that eschatological metaphors function as cultural anchors for hope and communal identity, and misinterpretation can disrupt not just theology but also lived religious practice (Bediako, 2021; Tiénou, 2022). The problem here is not linguistic limitation—there is nothing in the Lutsotso language that prevents a faithful rendering of *siku ya mwisho* (“last day”). Rather, the error reveals theological unawareness and constructive imprecision in interpretation. Such carelessness is avoidable, yet when it occurs, it demonstrates how interpreters can inadvertently distort doctrine if they lack adequate preparation. Scholars of translation and hermeneutics have argued that interpreters must act as theological mediators, not simply language brokers, especially where eschatological vocabulary such as resurrection, judgment, and eternal life is at stake (Walls, 2021; Sanneh, 2023).

The consequences of distortion are far-reaching. If congregants internalize the notion that resurrection is merely an accompaniment of individual death, they risk losing sight of the communal, future-oriented hope that defines Christian eschatology. Over time, this could reshape how believers conceptualize hope, judgment, and eternal life, gradually replacing robust doctrinal affirmations with diluted or individualistic notions of salvation. This underscores the urgency of theological vigilance in church interpretation. Training programs for interpreters should therefore integrate not only linguistic competence but also doctrinal grounding, equipping them to safeguard

theological accuracy. In doing so, interpreters can help preserve the sanctity of eschatological teaching and prevent the subtle erosion of one of Christianity’s most enduring sources of hope.

Example 7: Loss in Instructional Precision
When issuing congregational guidance, the preacher instructed:

P: “*Tusali mara tatu kwa siku kama Danieli*” (Let us pray three times a day like Daniel).

I: “*Lekha khusaye inyanga ndala*” (Let us pray once a day).

In this case the interpreter did not convey the exact figure, three times, and thus lowered the level of biblical devotion that was modelled after Daniel. This avoidable omission undermined the teaching message (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1995). The fact that the interpreter did not include the numerical detail in this case totally changed what the preacher wanted to teach. The change between three times to once undermines the strength of the exhortation as it loses the biblical basis of the devotion of Daniel and instead it lacks any motivational value. The practice that was supposed to stimulate a perseverance in prayer following a biblical example had turned into a far more less rigorous one and it lowered the commitment level without purposeful intent.

At the heart of religious interpretation lies instructional accuracy, since much of preaching is directive in nature—guiding worshippers in prayer, moral behavior, and spiritual discipline. When an interpreter fails to faithfully render such instructions, the distortion extends beyond linguistic clarity; it directly shapes congregational response and practice. In this case, the misrepresentation of a simple number is not trivial. It compromises the integrity of the message and alters how the congregation embodies the teaching in practice. While Seleskovitch and Lederer (1995) long ago described such lapses as avertable errors caused by inattentiveness rather than linguistic constraints, recent scholarship continues to highlight the critical importance of precision in religious interpreting. For instance, Katan and Taibi (2021) argued that omissions or inaccuracies in translation often reframe the speaker’s intent, leading to unintended consequences in

communities where interpretation serves as the primary conduit of doctrine.

The error here is not merely semantic but pedagogical. Congregants who rely exclusively on interpreted sermons internalize the instructions they hear as binding spiritual truth. A distortion in numeric expressions—something as simple as “three times” being mistranslated—can gradually cultivate weaker prayer habits or misaligned practices, undermining both the preacher’s credibility and the congregation’s spiritual formation. Scholars such as Chibamba (2022) emphasized that minor inaccuracies in religious interpreting can accumulate into systemic mistrust, especially in African contexts where oral teaching carries authoritative weight.

Unlike abstract theological concepts that may lack one-to-one equivalents across languages, numeric expressions and procedural instructions are linguistically straightforward. Their distortion therefore reflects not unavoidable linguistic difference but a failure of precision and attentiveness. This underscores the unique burden placed on church interpreters: to exercise both linguistic fidelity and pastoral responsibility. As recent research in translation studies has noted, interpreters must cultivate “micro-sensitivity” to detail in order to maintain the doctrinal and instructional integrity of religious messages (Zhang & Xie, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires more than ad hoc corrections. Regular training in scriptural texts, practical rehearsals of liturgical and instructional vocabulary, and collaborative preparation with preachers can help minimize lapses. By fostering both linguistic precision and theological awareness, interpreters can ensure that the smallest details—numbers, times, conditions—are transmitted with the weight they deserve, preserving the integrity of faith practice within the congregation.

Example 8: Doctrinal Distortion through Carelessness

On another occasion, the preacher stated:

P: “Wokovu ni kwa neema, si kwa matendo”
(Salvation is by grace, not by works).

I: “Obuhonia nokhubira ebikhole ebilayi”
(Salvation is by doing good).

This case represents not just a minor interpretive lapse but a profound and preventable distortion of Protestant theology. By inverting the doctrine of *sola gratia*—salvation by grace alone—into a works-based framework, the interpreter altered one of the most central tenets of Protestant faith. Such a shift is not a matter of semantics but a theological reversal with far-reaching consequences. As Stine (2004) observed, mistranslation in Christian contexts can alter doctrinal understanding, but contemporary scholarship underscores that the stakes are even higher in oral interpretation, where congregants often lack access to the source text. Recent studies note that interpretive errors in African church settings can easily reshape doctrinal teaching and devotional practice, particularly when they touch core doctrines like grace, salvation, or faith (Chimombo & Mtenje, 2021; Gitau, 2022).

At the heart of Protestant theology lies the conviction that salvation is God’s gift, not human achievement. By reformulating this doctrine in terms of “good works,” the interpreter effectively displaced a Christ-centered soteriology with a human-centered ethic. Such theological inversion risks not only misinforming congregants but also reorienting their lived spirituality away from reliance on divine grace toward anxious self-reliance. As recent scholarship emphasizes, distorted teaching on grace tends to undermine the pastoral function of preaching by fostering guilt, moralism, and spiritual exhaustion rather than renewal (Ndlovu, 2023; Lee, 2024). This type of misrepresentation is entirely preventable. Unlike unavoidable challenges of cross-cultural or lexical incommensurability, both Kiswahili and Lutsotso have the linguistic capacity to faithfully render the idea of salvation by grace. The problem lies not in the languages themselves but in the interpreter’s lack of theological grounding and attentiveness. As Zhang and Xie (2023) argue in translation studies, preventable errors often arise from inadequate preparation and a failure to cultivate “micro-sensitivity” to doctrinally weighty terms. In ecclesial contexts, such negligence carries lasting consequences: congregations may internalize flawed doctrine, transmit it intergenerationally, and gradually reshape

communal theology in unintended directions.

The ripple effects of such misinterpretations demonstrate the urgent need for theological literacy among church interpreters. Mere bilingual fluency is insufficient. Interpreters must be equipped with a working understanding of Christian theology—particularly doctrines such as grace, salvation, and justification—so that their renderings safeguard rather than subvert the integrity of the gospel message. As Gitau (2022) and Chibamba (2022) remind us, interpreters are not neutral conveyors of information but active participants in the shaping of communal faith. When poorly trained, they risk unintentionally restructuring the very theological fabric of the community they serve. Proper preparation, collaborative work with preachers, and regular theological formation are therefore not optional but essential safeguards against doctrinal perversion.

Conclusion

This study revealed that theological and liturgical terms in Kiswahili–Lutsotso church interpretation are often inadequately translated or left untranslated, resulting in serious distortions of meaning. Core doctrines such as resurrection and salvation were sometimes impoverished, while biblical metaphors like “light” and “vine” were misrepresented, leading to weakened theological clarity. Both pastors and congregants confirmed that such errors are common, particularly with metaphorical or doctrinal expressions, reflecting challenges similar to those in medicine or law where specialized language is difficult to render precisely. These findings underscore that interpretation in church settings requires more than linguistic competence; it demands theological grounding and doctrinal sensitivity. Interpreters must therefore work closely with pastors and make deliberate use of Bible translations to ensure that the richness of Christian teaching is faithfully conveyed.

The implications of these findings are significant, as misinterpretation does not merely alter wording

but reshapes how congregants understand and live out their faith. Distortions of doctrines such as salvation by grace, resurrection hope, or divine healing risk narrowing congregants’ vision of the gospel and compromising spiritual formation. Respondents highlighted the urgent need for structured interpreter training in theological institutions, combining language proficiency with theological education in areas such as Christology, pneumatology, and eschatology. Preachers, too, have a role to play by moderating their use of complex vocabulary and learning local languages like Lutsotso to strengthen direct communication. Such measures build trust, foster deeper participation in worship, and enhance the credibility of both the preacher and the interpreter. Practical strategies such as paraphrasing, analogy, and explication can further safeguard meaning when cultural or doctrinal terms resist direct equivalence.

In closing, the study makes clear that meaning loss in church interpretation is both a linguistic and theological problem with far-reaching implications for doctrinal purity, faith practice, and cultural transmission. While some losses are inevitable due to structural differences between languages, many are preventable through professionalism, training, and theological literacy. The integration of frameworks such as equivalence theory and Relevance Theory provides useful guidance for balancing fidelity to the text with accessibility for the audience. Ultimately, interpreters must cultivate not only bilingual precision but also intercultural competence and theological awareness to preserve the integrity of Christian teaching. These lessons extend beyond the church to other domains like education and healthcare, where accuracy and resonance are equally vital. Future research should further examine congregants’ perceptions of meaning loss, compare practices across Kenyan languages, and explore multimodal strategies—such as gesture and intonation—to enhance the clarity and impact of interpretation.

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