

Challenges of Multilingual Research: A Discourse in the Context of Nagaland, India

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Abstract

Nagaland, a small Northeastern state in India, may be considered to be one of the world's most linguistically diverse regions. This is so because it is home to 17 officially recognized tribes, along with many unrecognized sub-tribes, most of whom speak two to three sub-dialects that are often not mutually intelligible. For example, the Chakhesang tribe has three distinct dialects, namely, Chokri, Khezha, and Sapu, each unique in phonology and lexicon, that members of this tribe find it difficult to communicate with each other. This diversity creates challenges for both education and research. In a similar vein, multilingual research in Nagaland recurrently encounters difficulties and challenges that go beyond the conventional global frameworks. Although multilingual research has made advancements, contexts like Nagaland, which are characterized by multilayered linguistic complexity, remain to be addressed. This study presents the argument that standard research methods, which usually assume more uniform linguistic contexts, are not sufficient for Nagaland. It also raises the need for context-sensitive approaches to multilingual research that can account for such complexity. The study explores the challenges of conducting multilingual research in Nagaland, while also evaluating the limitations of existing research methods, and attempts to advocate for a new framework that can better suit its multilingual realities. The findings of the study contribute to the broader discourse on multilingual research methods by emphasizing the importance of culture and linguistic sensitivity in diverse contexts.

Keywords

hyper-diverse; linguistic diversity; methodological challenges; multilingual research; participatory action research

1. Introduction

In the context of multilingual societies, where multiple languages and dialects exist side by side, both advantages and disadvantages arise, especially for academic research. As more studies are done in such linguistically diverse communities, it becomes important to address the questions around whether dominant research methodologies work in such settings. Building on this premise, this study focuses on Nagaland, a state in Northeast India known for its exceptional linguistic plurality, to examine how research methodologies need to adapt to remain valid and inclusive. Regions like Nagaland remain methodologically unrepresented despite global advances in multilingual research, as traditional research frameworks continue to fail in accommodating their intricate socio-linguistic realities. In the context of Nagaland, language is more than just a means for communication; it also plays a crucial role in shaping communal identity, maintaining collective memory, expressing belonging, or resisting the homogenizing control of narratives (Chaterji, 2025; Longkumer & Choksi, 2025; Tikhir, 2024). It may be noted that ignoring this symbolic multidimensional function can not only distort research results but also potentially become a source of socio-cultural conflict.

The present study is then driven by the objective of exploring the unique challenges that emerge when conducting research in such multilingual environments and advocates for the development of tailored methodological approaches that are both culturally sensitive and contextually grounded.

1.1. Contextual Overview

Nagaland, one of the northeastern states of India, stands out as one of the most linguistically dense and diverse regions in the world (Borah & Gope, 2025). Despite its small geographical area, the state is home to more than twenty-five major indigenous languages with 17 officially recognized tribes and numerous sub-tribes, each possessing distinct linguistic identities (as per 2011 Census data). Over 70 languages and sub-dialects are actively spoken, reflecting linguistic diversity (Nagaland Tribune, 2025). The need for a common language for large-scale communication arose, leading to Nagamese, a pidgin, being adopted as the lingua franca of the state. What sets Nagaland apart is not just the number of languages spoken but the nature of multilingualism marked by layers of intra-tribal, inter-dialectal, and inter-village variations. In Nagaland, language encapsulates the community's cultural heritage and shared consciousness, extending beyond its communicative purpose (Longkumer, 2016; Nagaland Tribune, 2025; Walling, 2022). While culturally rich, this linguistic density presents many challenges to researchers attempting to engage with communities through various methodologies (Borah & Gope, 2025).

One of the unique linguistic features of Nagaland is that the tribes are internally multilingual. For instance, the Chakhesang is linguistically divided into three mutually unintelligible dialects: Chokri, Khezha, and Sapu. It has five different tones that can change the meaning of the word (Gogoi et al., 2024). A simple phrase like "Have you eaten your food?" is expressed in entirely distinct ways across the three dialects: *Mha ti ma la?* in Chokri, *Khuni to ma la?* in Khezha, and *Avu le ma?* in Sapu. Similarly, the Ao tribe speaks two principal dialects, namely, Mongsen and Chungli, which are also mutually unintelligible. While in the same Chungli dialect, for instance, the word "meat" is *shee* in one dialect and *shoo* in another. Borah and Gope (2025) have also highlighted this diversity; the Ao tribe has five dialects, Zeliangrong has three, and Yimkhiung has five. Apart from these, such diversity can be seen in the remaining tribes in Nagaland, often requiring a third language, such as Nagamese or

English, for intra-tribal communication. The question of whether these languages can be classified as dialects or distinct languages is also posed.

However, this only reflects the first layer of linguistic variation. Within these dialects, variations occur, shaped primarily by geography, clan divisions, and village-specific usage, further complicating linguistic categorization. For example, even within the Chokri-speaking villages, such as Pholami and Kikriima, there are noticeable differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and even grammatical structures. The word for “fish” may be *khu* in one village but *fü* in another. These small differences may seem minor, but they can still lead to confusion and misunderstanding between speakers of the “same” dialect. According to Longkumer (2016), nearly every Naga tribe shows this kind of variation, which can be linked strongly to geography or clan.

It may be noted that the linguistic complexity in the case of Nagaland extends beyond just words and sounds; it is closely interlinked with social and cultural aspects as well. It may be reiterated here that language is not only a means of communication but also a marker of identity, a way of preserving oral traditions, and a symbol of collective memory that shapes community belonging (Longchar, 2011). As demonstrated in Tikhir’s (2024) study, the role of language in Nagaland becomes a source of conflict and power struggles when one group tries to impose its language on another, regardless of their historical or cultural identity, even within the same religious context.

Any effort to unify these dialects has been met with challenges. A significant example can be derived from the translation of the Bible into local languages, the translation of the Bible into the Chokri dialect. To date, a consensus on the accepted version remains elusive, despite efforts to create a version of the Bible that incorporates the various dialectical forms. While inclusive in intent, the resulting text has become difficult for many to read because it combines dialects unfamiliar to community sections. This has also sparked disagreements and tensions, as some dialects appear to dominate the text while others are minimally represented. Such linguistic conflicts highlight the broader cultural and identity struggles inherent in standardization efforts (Temsunungsang & Bareh, 2016). Thus, in such complex settings, it is necessary to understand language as a living source of identity, the ignoring of which marginalizes individual groups and causes profound social and emotional consequences.

Even national policies can clash with Nagaland’s multilingual realities. The NEP 2020, for example, promotes mother tongue-based instruction in early education as a way to preserve cultural heritage and promote linguistic inclusion. However, it assumes the existence of a single standardized mother-tongue within each community; an assumption that does not hold in Nagaland’s context. This fails to embrace the complex linguistic realities of Nagaland, a setting where no single mother tongue can represent the state as a whole. Not a single indigenous language functions as the medium of instruction in schools in Nagaland (Longkumer, 2016), and English serves as the medium of instruction. In Nagaland, the identification of “mother tongue” becomes ambiguous as multiple dialects coexist (Dkhar & Kakoty, 2023). The multiplicity of dialects without written scripts makes it challenging to create educational materials or establish effective teaching methods (Hegui, 2024). As Maisuangdibou (2020) and Devi (2019) note, the policy may hinder inclusive education by failing to account for regions like Nagaland’s multilingual and non-standardized realities.

The policy fails to fully consider these local realities, hence creating a mismatch between the goals of the policy and what is possible on the ground (Sen & Panda, 2024). For instance, classrooms in Nagaland often

comprise students from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds, representing each language and sub-dialects. This diversity raises critical questions: How should such classrooms be organized? How many teachers would be required to cater to each language group? How will teaching materials be developed for languages that are not yet standardized? Moreover, the issue of language selection becomes politically and culturally sensitive; which language will be chosen for instruction, and which will be left out? Maisuangdibou (2020) and Devi (2019) argue that the policy may hinder inclusive education by failing to account for regions like Nagaland's multilingual and non-standardized realities. Even transformative pedagogical tools such as translanguaging face limitations. Ticheloven et al. (2021) note the difficulty in applying it effectively, especially when languages are completely unintelligible to each other. Ball (2011) suggests that teachers should be trained to teach lessons in a non-dominant language, but this would require large-scale training and recruitment, which the current education system is unprepared for (Hegui, 2024). Although NEP 2020 states that "teachers will be encouraged to use a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials, with those students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 13), creating such materials in multiple languages will be a challenging task, requiring proper planning and execution.

It may be stated that without substantial structural and pedagogical support, the gap between policy aspirations and ground realities will continue. While the NEP 2020 emphasizes linguistic inclusion, in Nagaland, the multiplicity of dialects, the absence of standardized scripts, and the lack of teaching materials, as highlighted above, make such implementation complex. Unless the policy framework addresses these structural barriers, the vision of inclusive education will remain a goal on paper. The above discussion demonstrates how external frameworks expose the very methodological problem this study aims to explore, highlighting the need for policies designed for Nagaland's unique layered linguistic context. Linguistic inclusion cannot be treated as a one-size-fits-all directive but must instead be framed as a contextualized strategy that reflects local multilingual realities. NEP 2020 is used solely as a contextual example to illustrate how standardized systems may interact with the complex multilingual realities of Nagaland. The case of Nagaland highlights the importance of research methodologies that carefully consider highly complex local realities, particularly in relation to language policy.

Within such a premise, multilingual research in Nagaland cannot rely on broad assumptions. For instance, stating that a study was conducted in "Chokri-speaking" villages can be misleading, as "Chokri" itself encompasses multiple dialectical variations. Without a nuanced understanding of such intricacies, research risks misrepresenting the lived realities of the communities involved. These realities pose critical methodological challenges. This renders data collected in one village non-transferable to another, making generalizations challenging and potentially misinterpreted. The questions of how one accounts for such variations within a single language, which dialect should be prioritized when collecting data, if findings from one village authentically inform one's understanding of another, and many more, need to be carefully examined.

To conduct meaningful, ethical, and accurate research in such a multilingual setting, it is important to have methodologies that are capable of engaging with such complexities. Recognizing that language in Nagaland is not just linguistic but social and cultural, researchers must develop tools that are flexible, inclusive, and grounded in community knowledge systems. In this context, while linguistic diversity enriches culture, it also poses challenges for education, administration, and research. It is therefore worth noting that any study

conducted in such a setting must begin with an understanding of the multifaceted role of language. It is only through direct engagement with such intricate and layered realities that researchers can begin to design frameworks that are not only methodologically effective but also inclusive.

1.2. Problem Statement

While multilingual research is gaining importance globally, it can be observed that most of the existing methods are tailored for contexts with standardized, written languages used in academic purposes (Csata & Marácz, 2021). These methods fail to account for the oral traditions, dialectical variation, and intra-tribal multilingualism that define Nagaland's linguistic context. This unique context challenges the notion of shared linguistic identity, with small variations making it difficult to classify and communicate.

The challenges for researchers, then, lie in the difficulty of accessing communities, translating across different dialects, and representing data that is deeply rooted in culture and oral traditions. Because of this, standard research methods and tools do not work in Nagaland's context. As Emenano (2002) rightly states, language policies need to match real linguistic situations. There is a clear need for new, flexible research approaches that respect the region's linguistic diversity and cultural realities. The study addresses the gap by exploring how researchers can navigate meaningfully with the hyper-diverse linguistic nature of Nagaland through adaptive, inclusive, and community-informed methodologies.

2. Literature Review

Language plays a complex and influential role in the research process, particularly in multilingual and intercultural contexts. Although multilingualism is increasingly recognized as an important research concern, qualitative studies involving multiple languages often lack clear methodological guidance. Cross-language research where researchers and participants do not share a common language presents challenges that can affect the credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy of findings (Edwards, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Decisions about which language to use in interviews, analysis, and dissemination are never neutral (Svensson, 2024); they are intertwined with social, cultural, and political hierarchies that shape access, representation, and power relations.

Global scholarship highlights the ethical and practical complexities of multilingual research, including issues of translation, working with interpreters, and communicating culturally specific academic concepts. Crane et al. (2009) emphasize that research in multilingual "constellations" exposes scholars to not only translation issues but also deeper concerns about the researcher's role, interpretation of meaning, and connecting different cultural ways of producing and sharing knowledge. Temple and Edwards (2002) and Holmes et al. (2013) stress that translation should be treated as a co-creative process that actively shapes interpretation and preserves cultural nuance. Within this concern, a recurring "researcher–interpreter–interviewee problem" reveals the fragility of co-creation through problems such as interpreter qualifications, breaches of confidentiality, and disruption of conversation due to third parties (Edwards, 2013; Edwards et al., 2006; Ekström et al., 2022; Kosny et al., 2014). These issues show that the interpreter's role is never neutral but directly affects the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process (Åberg et al., 2025). They are active co-creators who equalize language access, transmit emotional nuance, and help establish joint legitimacy, while researchers must remain alert to their own linguistic privilege and its impact on knowledge production (Åberg et al., 2025;

Björk Brämberg & Dahlberg, 2013; Edwards et al., 2006). In the same light, Schembri and Jahić Jašić (2022) further highlight the issue of privileging English as the language in academia, though the use of participants' first language (L1) has the potential of producing richer, more authentic data. This invariably raises ethical concerns about power, representation, and loss of cultural identity.

In the context of Nagaland as well, researchers have highlighted the challenges of working in a densely diverse linguistic setting, with over 25 major indigenous languages and more than 70 dialects, many mutually unintelligible (Borah & Gope, 2025). Nagamese is generally viewed as a lingua franca, but it is a pidgin with no standardized script and differs significantly from indigenous languages. Further, it holds no affinity with the indigenous Naga culture. The challenge for researchers, then, is to deal with multiple layers of translation; from participant language to Nagamese to English for academic purposes, raising ethical and methodological concerns around misrepresentation of cultural identity and loss of meaning (Borah & Gope, 2025; Pavlenko, 2005). This may also be attributed to the translators and interpreters, who engage in the study as active participants with their own tribal affiliation, dialect, and social position, which influence how data are interpreted. The accuracy, trust, and cultural sensitivity of the data collection and analysis are also significantly shaped by the involvement of the translators and interpreters (Halai, 2007; Tsai et al., 2004). Squires (2009) highlights how interpreters' choices, training, and personality shape data accuracy and cultural meaning. There are practical challenges that further complicate research in Nagaland, such as geographic, financial limitations, and socio-cultural expectations (Borah & Gope, 2025).

The link between language, identity, and power has been recurrently emphasized by theories of multilingualism and language policy. Multilingualism is growing into prominence as a socio-political issue, as much as a linguistic one, due to factors such as globalization, internationalization, and efforts to preserve linguistic diversity (Anisimova, 2016), influencing identity, intercultural communication, education, and social unity while seeking to protect minority and regional languages. The objectives of multilingualism, particularly its emphasis on how language is not only a means for communication but rather a marker of identity, closely apply to Nagaland as well. However, in practice, the methodological innovations, such as translanguaging and code switching, among many others, remain inadequate for the context of Nagaland, coupled with a lack of research in the multilingual situation of the state (Jami & Keturah, 2022, as cited in Hegui, 2024; Longkumer, 2016). This study is then situated within this gap, highlighting the urgent need for reflexive, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded approaches that can account for the linguistic, cultural, and social realities of the region.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach that is both participatory and context-sensitive in nature. It employs an ethnographic approach with a period of three months, where the authors employed participatory action research (PAR) to engage with the samples involved in the study. The research was independently conducted by the authors and was not supported by any external funding. The sample comprised nine researchers, selected because they were actively engaged in ongoing projects addressing multilingual themes in Nagaland. Four of them were postgraduate students engaged in their dissertation research, and five were doctoral scholars in the fieldwork phase of their research. These nine researchers, who form the core of the study, are not co-authors but participants who shared their research experiences. They represented four major Naga tribes, namely Angami, Ao, Sumi, and Chakhesang, and spoke their

respective local dialects, in addition to Nagamese (the lingua franca) and English. For clarity of reference in this study, the researchers are denoted as R1 through R9, while the community participants they worked with, such as village elders, women's groups, and student unions, are represented as C1 through C23.

The design of the research was iterative in nature, which ensured the accommodation of emerging themes based on the insights gained during the fieldwork. Data on field challenges were collected through in-depth interviews with the nine researchers who shared their experiences and observations of their own participants, providing insights aligned with the objectives of the study. The study drew upon PAR, which has been defined as an approach that is community-driven in nature and allows for a collaborative approach in which researchers and participants work together as co-investigators. In contrast to the standard traditional research, PAR aims to involve marginalized communities and participants in designing research methodology, research questions, and outcomes (Cornish et al., 2023). The emphasis lies on the cycles of action, reflection, and evaluation, which are iterative in nature and aim to address injustices in the world by empowering local voices (Chilisa, 2024). In a hyper-diverse linguistic landscape such as Nagaland, PAR attempts to bridge the gap between power imbalances by embracing oral traditions and indigenous languages in data collection and analysis (García & Tupas, 2024). While the study interviewed researchers rather than community members directly, it remains community-driven in orientation, as these researchers' insights come from their active engagement with local communities during fieldwork. Their experiences reflect the voices and realities of those communities, making this study a reflective participatory research grounded in real community interactions.

3.1. Research Questions

Based on the reviewed literature and problems identified in the proposed research, the following research questions have been framed:

RQ1: What are the key linguistic and cultural complexities that uniquely challenge research efforts in Nagaland's hyper-diverse multilingual context?

RQ2: How and why do existing multilingual research frameworks prove inadequate in addressing these context-specific challenges?

RQ3: What methodological adaptations or innovations are required to develop inclusive, ethically responsible, and context-sensitive research practices suitable for Nagaland?

4. Findings of the Study

4.1. Linguistic and Cultural Complexities in Nagaland's Hyper-Diverse Multilingual Context

Regarding RQ1, the analysis found that research in Nagaland's hyper-diverse multilingual context is challenged by two interlinked domains of complexity: extreme multilingualism and cultural sensitivity, both of which surfaced repeatedly across the accounts of the nine participants.

4.1.1. Extreme Multilingualism

The fieldwork revealed the layered complexity of multilingualism in Nagaland, not only between languages but also within the same language.

Case 1 presents the Chokri-speaking context of a Chakhesang PhD researcher, originally from Pholami Village, who conducted interviews with an elder (Sample C3) in Kikrüma Village as part of a study on indigenous knowledge systems. The elder was recounting traditional practices surrounding the sugarcane plant. An interview excerpt reads as follows (Sample R2):

The elder described sugarcane as one of the most cherished plants in the kitchen yard. It was customarily given to favorite grandchildren, nephews, or nieces as a token of love and affection. He also explained that sugarcane was consumed by field workers who had ingested rice beer, as it was believed to help lower alcohol levels so they could continue working. However, the terminology used in Kikrüma posed immediate challenges. The elder repeatedly referred to sugarcane as *Nyuproprei*, a term completely unfamiliar to me. In Pholami, we call it *Tupuli*, and the semantic difference disrupted my understanding of the narrative. I had to pause the interview several times to clarify with the elder what he meant by *Nyuproprei*. To ensure accuracy, I relied on a local assistant from Kikrüma who was fluent in the village-specific Chokri dialect.

This case shows that village-specific dialectical variations, even within the same broader Chokri language, can create challenges in understanding and accurately documenting indigenous knowledge. The elder's narrative about sugarcane, referred to as *Nyuproprei* in Kikrüma Village, demonstrates how terminological differences within the same dialect can significantly affect researchers' understanding and interpretation of indigenous knowledge systems. The Pholami-based researcher (Sample R2), familiar with the term *Tupuli*, initially struggled to follow the narrative, revealing that even minor lexical divergences can disrupt comprehension and risk misrepresentation of culturally embedded practices. The repeated need for clarification during the interview highlights the limitations of assuming dialectical uniformity. It may be stated that without attention to these micro-variations, even well-intentioned research may inadvertently fail to gain substantial insights into the areas studied.

Case 2 presents the Angami-speaking context of an Angami researcher from Northern Angami Kohima Village (Sample R5), who conducted fieldwork in Chiechama Village, another Northern Angami settlement (Western Angami Village), to document oral traditions and local legends. Although both villages belong to the same tribe and geographical area, their dialects are markedly different, with only a few terms in common. Tonal variations and unique vocabulary made direct conversation nearly impossible.

A village elder (sample C12) began recounting a story inherited from his grandfather about a family of seven and the pig they raised to be feasted upon during the *Sekrenyi* festival. However, the narrative flow was repeatedly disrupted due to dialectal differences. For instance, the elder referred to "rice" as *Tie*, whereas in Kohima Village it is called *Khutie*. Similarly, the term for "pig" was *Thovo* in Chiechama and *Thevo* in Kohima Village. Other kinship terms posed significant challenges, such as *Awuo* for "elder brothers" in Chiechama had no immediate equivalent in Kohima, and *Anyie* ("big sister") and *Anyienuo* ("small sister") were entirely unfamiliar to the researcher. Even minor conversational phrases required mediation. The researcher reported:

Even making small talk before the interview required the interpreter's intervention. During the story, I had to pause multiple times to clarify terms with the interpreter, as direct comprehension was impossible. The tonal differences not only altered pronunciation but also the implied meaning and social nuance. Without the interpreter, the narrative would have been misrepresented or fragmented. (Sample R5)

This case further exemplifies an extreme multilingual scenario even within a single tribal region, highlighting how intra-tribal dialectal variation can significantly hinder the collection of reliable data. Despite shared tribal identity and geographic proximity, the distinct vocabulary, tonal patterns, and semantic differences between Kohima Village and Chiechama Village created barriers that disrupted the flow of oral narratives. Because of these differences, the interpreter accompanied the session but did not translate continuously. The interpreter intervened only when dialectical terms or concepts were unfamiliar, offering brief explanations, for example, clarifying kinship terms such as Awuo or Anyienuo that lacked direct counterparts in the researcher's dialect. The researcher's repeated reliance on the interpreter emphasizes the critical role of mediators in preventing misrepresentation or misinterpretation of data. However, it also raises a key question: Can mediators ever fully convey information in its original, nuanced form? The effectiveness of interpreters is dependent on their familiarity not only with the language but also with the specific cultural and research context. There is a potential risk of data misinterpretation arising due to the mediators' bias or a lack of complete understanding of the community's culture.

4.1.2. Cultural Sensitivity and Language

It has been recurrently implied that language is deeply tied to culture, identity, and community values in the context of Nagaland. While being culturally sensitive means respecting local languages, traditions, and promoting inclusivity, a lack of sensitivity can lead to misunderstanding, misrepresentation, or exclusion. The following analysis draws on field experiences from different tribal contexts to illustrate how researchers conducted their study within the backdrop of the complex interplay of language, culture, and social norms.

The first case example can be drawn from the research experience of Sample R9 (Sataka Village, Sema Tribe), who conducted research in Chishilimi Village, both Sumi-speaking communities. She attempted to interview a woman leader regarding local governance and customary decision-making. Though she was fluent, many terms in Chishilimi were unfamiliar, creating immediate communication challenges. She therefore had to resort to Nagamese and English to bridge the gap, but the informant exhibited signs of discomfort with this approach, perceiving it as disrespectful, and chose not to continue the interview. She was compelled to engage a mediator fluent in both dialects, allowing the following interview to proceed more effectively. This case example highlights the critical role of language in establishing trust and respect, particularly in relation to local authority and cultural norms.

Another case example may be highlighted here to further highlight the importance of being culturally aware in conducting research. R1, a researcher from a Khezha-speaking Chakhesang village, conducted an interview in Kikrüma, a Chokri-speaking village, with a village elder on the historical account of the Kikrüma War. However, the stark dialectical differences required a mediator to facilitate communication. In an attempt to establish rapport, the researcher casually exclaimed *yikhale*, intending it as a lighthearted remark. The elder, however, reacted with visible shock. R1 later learned that while the younger generation of

Kikrūma villagers had repurposed *yikhale* as a casual expression of humor, in its original usage, it is considered a severe curse.

The case examples highlighted above reveal that in Nagaland, language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as a key marker of cultural identity, social hierarchy, and local norms. Even when researchers are fluent in a related dialect, subtle differences in terminology, tone, and culturally loaded expressions can affect interaction, trust, and the willingness of participants to share information. Misinterpretations such as casual exclamations being perceived as offensive or generational shifts in meaning highlight how linguistic nuances are inseparable from cultural context. These observations demonstrate that multilingual research in such settings extends beyond linguistic competence; it requires cultural sensitivity, awareness of local social protocols, and, where necessary, collaboration with mediators who are both linguistically and culturally competent. The absence of such precautions may lead to the data being misrepresented, disengagement of participants, and the inability of the research to capture authentic data within oral traditions.

4.2. Addressing Context-Specific Challenges With Inadequate Multilingual Research Frameworks

Multilingual research frameworks are usually designed to make studies more inclusive, but in Nagaland, they often do not work as intended. This is because they are based on assumptions such as shared literacy, universal meanings of concepts, and the possibility of direct translation that do not match the local reality. In practice, these frameworks struggle to capture the richness of oral traditions, cultural values, and context-specific ways of speaking. As a result, important ideas may be misrepresented or lost. The following cases show how and why these frameworks fall short when applied in Nagaland's unique context.

4.2.1. Knowledge Systems Based on Oral Traditions vs. Eurocentric Assumptions

Conventional frameworks prioritize written instruments like surveys, questionnaires, and structured digital tools, which are largely incompatible with Nagaland's oral knowledge systems. For instance, R3, a postgraduate researcher from a Chokri-speaking village, reported administering a survey on participants' attitudes toward mother-tongue instruction. Despite a detailed explanation, most participants consistently selected *strongly agree* for every statement. One participant even asked: Which answer is correct? This indicates that the concept of graded agreement was unfamiliar. Even after rephrasing questions in Chokri, responses remained skewed, suggesting that the Likert-scale format was incompatible with local cognitive and evaluative frameworks. In Chokri, concepts of graded agreement or disagreement do not exist; responses are typically binary, with "yes" meaning "yes" and "no" meaning "no." This reflects a deeply held cultural value in which firmness of response is associated with honesty and integrity. Attempting to impose a scale requiring nuanced gradations contradicts these norms and may lead to confusion, misrepresentation, or inappropriate behavior within cultural norms. Similarly, R7, working in a remote Ao village (Mongsen dialect), noted that even when the survey was translated into the local dialect, some elders required clarification for nearly every question. A local mediator facilitated the process by paraphrasing questions in narrative form and providing culturally relevant context. Without mediation, responses were incomplete or inaccurate.

In another example, during focus group discussions in an Angami-speaking village, R4 observed that participants struggled to articulate opinions about education when prompts were delivered in English.

Concepts such as “curriculum integration” or “cultural preservation” had no direct equivalents in the local dialect. Translators reframed questions using culturally familiar metaphors and symbols. For instance, the term “curriculum,” which denotes the entirety of an educational program, has no direct equivalent in Tenyidie. Educational terms are broadly referred to as *mhasi* (“wisdom”), while schooling-related concepts are expressed as *lesü* (“book”) or *lesüki* (“school”). Education is understood as *lesü mhasi* (“book knowledge”), and an educated person is described as *lesü kephrümia*, literally “book reader.” These cases highlight that academic constructs derived from Eurocentric frameworks often do not align with indigenous knowledge systems, necessitating culturally sensitive adaptations to ensure meaningful and accurate data collection.

The cases show a clear gap between Western-style research tools and the oral, community-based knowledge systems of Nagaland. Many research methods assume that people think in written, structured, and abstract ways, but this does not fit well with communities where communication is mainly oral, responses are direct, and answers are usually just “yes” or “no.” In Naga culture, saying “yes” or “no” is linked to honesty and social integrity, so scales that ask for degrees of agreement, like *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree*, do not make sense. The examples also show that important academic terms, such as “curriculum integration” or “cultural preservation,” often do not have direct translations in local languages. Instead, they need to be explained through familiar cultural expressions and metaphors. This kind of adaptation was necessary not only to help participants understand the questions but also to make sure their answers were true to their cultural perspective. It may be noted that Eurocentric research assumptions cannot adequately capture the richness of orally transmitted knowledge.

4.2.2. Inadequate Translation Practices

The data also point to difficulties that arise not from research tools themselves but from the way translation is carried out during fieldwork. Standard multilingual research practices often insist on word-for-word translation, yet this clashes with local modes of communication that depend on metaphor, symbolism, and contextual interpretation. In reality, interpreters often moved beyond literal translation, reshaping concepts so they would make sense within the community’s cultural context. While this adaptive reframing facilitated smoother communication during fieldwork, it also resulted in subtle distortions of meaning that undermined the integrity of research data.

During fieldwork, R8, an Ao doctoral researcher conducting interviews on customary land practices among the Ao community, encountered a significant problem caused by translation. Despite being accompanied by an interpreter, the interaction demanded word-for-word translation, which led to loss of meaning, leading to misrepresentation in the research data. Responding to the open-ended question “How is land shared within your community?” a male elder responded in Ao, describing a system where land is “used and held” by members of the same clan, but not “owned” in the legal sense. The interpreter translated the response in English as: “In our village, we have collective ownership of land.” The expression “collective ownership” failed to capture the original intent of the elder’s statement. Later, through back-translation and consultation with a second local informant, it became clear that the Ao term referred to shared use under customary custodianship, not ownership in the modern legal sense.

This case shows how rigid adherence to dominant translation protocols can result in the distortion of conceptual meanings. Many indigenous concepts about land, kinship, and governance are based on

relationships and traditions that cannot be directly mapped onto single English words. Apart from this, it also exposed a gap in the interpreter's understanding of the cultural knowledge, highlighting that a limited understanding of local nuances can further lead to misrepresentation.

4.3. Methodological Adaptations in Context-Sensitive Research Practices Suitable for Nagaland

To develop research practices that are truly inclusive, ethical, and suited to a region such as Nagaland, important methodological changes are needed both in the way data is collected and in how it is interpreted. The methods commonly used in multilingual research often assume that languages are standardized, written, and mutually intelligible across communities, and such assumptions risk oversimplifying people's lived experiences and misrepresenting cultural realities.

A significant area that needs attention is translation, as seen in the case example of R8, where the interpreter translated the idea of "shared land" into "collective ownership." This translation overlooked the culturally embedded meaning of the term, demonstrating how a lack of cultural awareness can lead to misrepresentation. This can, in turn, affect how indigenous knowledge is preserved and shared. For this reason, selecting translators who understand local cultures and dialect variations becomes essential. Another aspect to be taken into consideration is the problem posed by standard tools like structured surveys and questionnaires, which are designed for structured answers. In communities like the Nagas, people are more comfortable with sharing knowledge through means of oral traditions like storytelling or collective discussions. Researchers must respect these cultural practices for accurate and meaningful data collection. Even in terms of data interpretation, researchers can also involve community participation, such as local knowledge keepers and community members, rather than depending on outsiders who are not aware of the culture. This not only ensures greater accuracy but also guards against the imposition of external categories and values that may distort indigenous realities. One such example was seen during the fieldwork of R3, where data was collected through an informal discussion between participants and village elders on a *küwhu ba*, which is an elevated traditional platform in a participant's home used for gatherings. This allowed for a comfortable environment. The topic was discussed collectively, building on one another's accounts and clarifying points when needed. Such discussions provided depth and contextual nuances that standard, individual interviews might have missed. This shows how locally preferred forms of dialogue can give more authentic data.

In light of the above discussions, conducting research in Nagaland requires more than just speaking the language. It calls for cultural sensitivity, respect for local knowledge systems, and a willingness to adjust research methods based on field realities.

5. Implication of the Study

This study presents several implications for research in linguistically complex settings. It highlights that standard definitions and approaches to multilingual research are inadequate for linguistically dense settings like the Nagaland language, as variations occur across multiple layers. For such reasons, there is a need for the rethinking and redesigning of tools such as Surveys, Likert Scales, and even strategies like code-switching, as they may not be effective unless they are co-developed with the local community and adapted to the specific linguistic needs. This then makes it necessary for research training programs to

emphasize methodological flexibility in the field, ethnographic sensitivity, and active community involvement, ensuring that researchers are not only academically competent but are also capable of dealing with real cultural and linguistic complexities they encounter in the fieldwork.

There is also a need to understand how data is interpreted and presented in culturally sensitive settings, as language is much more than just a tool for communication. Oversimplifying or generalizing linguistic variations simply for the sake of analysis can cause more harm than good; hence, community co-authorship, collaborative analysis, and culturally informed consent processes in future research should be considered.

Although the study is rooted in Nagaland, the findings can also be applied to other places with similar complex multilingual settings. It contributes to the discourse on decolonizing research methods, especially in indigenous, rural settings with localized complexities. Tailor-made methodologies that are region-specific and allow for dialect-level recognition are essential for accurate and meaningful research outcomes.

6. Discussion

The findings of the present study build upon findings from several studies that have addressed the challenges of research in a similar multilingual research context. For example, a study by Adamo and Marácz (2017) highlights the limitations of standardized research tools and policies in multilingual research and emphasizes a reframing of multilingual research frameworks toward more participatory, community-centred approaches that recognize dialectal diversity. They argue that when language policies are too rigid, they often fail to capture the real complexities of multilingual societies. Another study conducted by Csata and Marácz (2021) also argues in a similar line, stating that many policies treat multilingualism as a symbol of diversity without looking into how languages are intertwined into the everyday life and culture of the people. When translation is treated as a neutral, word-to-word transfer of a language tool for translation, it can cause harm because it overlooks the intrinsic connection of language to identity, culture, and history. Tikhir's (2024) study reinforces this argument by showing how communities that have faced cultural assimilation actively use language as a means of asserting their identity and protecting their history. These issues reflect the framework of Meier et al. (2024), who emphasize that language choices, including the involvement of interpreters, carry organizational, social, and political importance. Interpreters are not neutral messengers but active co-creators who influence the representation, trust, and legitimacy of the research process. Svensson (2024) further adds that meaning in multilingual interviews is continuously negotiated among the researcher, interpreter, and the participant, making data collection a dynamic, co-constructed process rather than a simple question-and-answer exchange. This strengthens the findings of the study, where in Nagaland, the interpreters shape both data collection and analysis through factors such as tribal affiliations and dialectical backgrounds.

Given the above concerns, within the context of linguistically dense Nagaland, relying solely on academic training is insufficient; researchers must cultivate deep linguistic and cultural sensitivity if they are to produce research that is inclusive and genuinely representative of the communities involved (Svensson, 2024). This study also finds that standard tools often do not work in Nagaland because they fail to deal with the many dialect differences and the unique realities of different communities. Like Csata and Marácz (2021) argue, research methods must be redesigned to fit the community's realities and must involve the community itself. This makes the research not only more accurate but also more respectful and meaningful.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the study highlight the challenges in conducting research in a linguistically diverse and culturally sensitive context like Nagaland and the need to rethink research approaches as opposed to standard, conventional approaches that often reflect Eurocentric biases. This lack can be attributed to factors such as prioritizing written over oral knowledge, the uncritical application of standardized tools that lack linguistic and cultural relevance, and the limited practice of collaborative or participatory methodologies.

The study presents alternatives and plausible solutions to these challenges, highlighting innovative methodological approaches such as participatory design, which actively involves community members in shaping the research process, and research frameworks that are flexibly adapted rather than rigidly applied. It also highlights the importance of layered and context-specific documentation where data is collected to capture cultural, linguistic, and contextual nuances beyond literal transcription. There is also an emphasis on collaborative research models that actively involve community members, values, and indigenous knowledge systems, and adhere to ethical standards to add value and authenticity to the study. This kind of shift in the paradigm should not be a mere technical adjustment but epistemologically reflected in recognizing and asserting value and importance to the indigenous knowledge systems.

In conclusion, linguistic diversity in a context like Nagaland is therefore not a barrier to overcome but becomes a vital aspect through which the identification of methodological challenges must not only be acknowledged but also be addressed for research to be conducted in a fair and ethically valid manner. An urgent need for transformation is recommended not just for the sake of advocating for inclusive methodological changes but for research to be valid in a multilingual setting, where it can be looked at as an opportunity rather than a hindrance.

8. Limitations

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The study is deeply rooted in the socio-linguistic context of Nagaland, making the generalizability of the findings highly context-specific; hence, applying the conclusions to other multilingual settings must be done cautiously and with necessary adaptations. Also, given the hyper-diverse and localized nature of dialects, the study may still fail to cover the entire linguistic variation across all tribes, sub-tribes, and villages in Nagaland, leaving some underrepresented. The duration of the study was also limited to three months; however, a long-term study might provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and intricacies involved in a multilingual setting. Finally, the study presented a brief picture of challenges in multilingual research in Nagaland, but it requires an in-depth analysis of power dynamics and other contributing factors.

By presenting limitations in the cross-cultural and linguistic translation and interpretation of reflective notes in collaboration with the community, the authors have attempted to address the various forms of bias, such as academic, urban, generational, researcher positionality, and translation.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

The study uses secondary qualitative data from interviews, which are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

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No LLMs were used in the making of this article.

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