

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN KENYA'S COUNTY ASSEMBLIES' HANSARDS: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVOLUTION, GOVERNANCE, AND DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

This article examines the linguistic and communicative challenges affecting Hansard reports from Kenya's county assemblies (CAs), specifically in budget debates from 18 assemblies between 2013 and 2019. Five principal challenges are highlighted. First, substandard grammar emerges in poor sentence structure, incorrect verb tenses, subject-verb disagreement, and misuse of pronouns, prepositions, and articles. Second, improper diction involves inappropriate word choices, unedited code-mixing without translation, and frequent misspellings. Third, coherence issues arise from rambling sentences, unclear speaker attributions, and inconsistent financial figures. Fourth, punctuation errors are evident in the misuse of commas, ellipses, full stops, capitalisation, acronyms, colons, and apostrophes. Fifth, poor typography is marked by inconsistent pagination, fonts, spacing, alignment, and formatting. These linguistic and communication problems undermine Hansard quality by introducing distortion, ambiguity, factual misrepresentation, incomprehension, and reduced readability. As a result, the transparency of Hansard reports as records of representative democracy is compromised, making it more difficult for the public to hold legislators and county assemblies accountable. In addition, these shortcomings erode the reports' integrity and professionalism, increasing the risk of litigation regarding assembly proceedings.

Cumulatively, such problems diminish the authority and historical value of Hansard reports and can weaken county assemblies as democratic institutions. By foregrounding the language and communication challenges in county assembly Hansards—a perspective often overlooked—this research draws attention to critical threats facing governance and democracy in Kenya’s evolving devolved governance system.

Key Words: Language and Communication Challenges, Kenya, Governance, Devolution, County Assemblies, Hansard, Representative Democracy

1. Introduction

Hansard reports are foundational records of legislative proceedings, serving as essential tools for transparency, accountability, and public scrutiny in representative democracies. Within Kenya’s devolved governance framework, county assembly Hansards are expected to provide an accurate, clear, and professional account of elected representatives’ deliberations. Although Hansard reports are designed to be “verbatim” transcriptions, they generally adhere to an “edited verbatim” approach, prioritising clarity and accuracy over strict word-for-word reproduction (Sutherland & Farrell, 2013). The core objective is to preserve the conceptual accuracy and intended meaning of parliamentary debates, rather than reproducing their precise linguistic form (Chilton & Schaffner, 2002; Slembrouck, 1992; Voutilainen, 2023).

This article examines the linguistic and communicative challenges facing Kenya’s County Assembly Hansard reports and assesses their implications for devolution, governance, and democratic accountability. Drawing on qualitative documentary analysis, the study identifies five persistent issues that undermine the quality and reliability of these legislative records: substandard grammar, improper diction, lack of coherence, flawed punctuation, and poor typography.

These challenges, the article argues, are not merely technical deficiencies; rather, they reflect deeper structural and procedural weaknesses in the Hansard production process at the county level. The resulting distortions, ambiguities, and readability issues compromise Hansards’ credibility as records of legislative activity. This, in turn, undermines their legitimacy as instruments of public accountability, institutional memory, and historical documentation. Such deficiencies erode the integrity and authority of county assemblies, diminishing public trust and weakening democratic representation. The findings underscore the urgent need for capacity building, robust editorial oversight, and institutional reforms to strengthen the communicative integrity of county assembly Hansards.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to explore the linguistic and communicative challenges embedded in Hansard reports from Kenya’s County Assemblies, and to evaluate their implications for devolution, governance, and democratic accountability. Krippendorff (2004:18) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” Unlike quantitative content analysis, the qualitative approach moves beyond surface-level features or word counts to investigate underlying meanings, recurring themes, and both manifest and latent patterns within texts. This method enables systematic yet interpretive analysis of communicative content, making it especially suitable for scrutinising institutional records like Hansards. The analysis was based on pre-existing textual data—specifically, Hansard reports from annual budget debates. The original aim was to conduct a comprehensive examination of linguistic and communicative practices in budget debates across 18 Kenyan County Assemblies over four fiscal

years (2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019), enabling both historical-comparative (diachronic) and cross-sectional (synchronic) perspectives. However, seven CAs did not provide the requested data—one citing confidentiality—and several submissions were incomplete. Of the 11 assemblies that did provide records, eight lacked 2013 data, and seven lacked 2015 data; only eight and nine CAs submitted full reports for 2017 and 2019, respectively, while two provided complete data for all four years. These gaps limited the study's ability to fully realise its intended analytical framework. Despite the fragmented and uneven dataset, the available Hansard reports offer valuable insights into systemic linguistic and communicative challenges, though their limitations necessitate cautious interpretation. The content analysis focused on five interrelated communicative language categories central to the authenticity, accuracy, and usability of Hansard reports in governance: grammar, diction, coherence, punctuation, and typographic conventions. To facilitate data organisation and visualisation, findings on communicative challenges (or their absence) for each analytic category, year, and assembly were summarised in Excel-based tables. This approach enabled recognition of patterns and trends across both time and institutional contexts. To ensure consistency in the identification and interpretation of communicative challenges, the study relied on inter-coder reliability among linguistics-trained experts with extensive teaching experience and at least a Master's degree in a language-based field.³ Findings

3.0. Analysis

The communication challenges in the county assembly Hansard reports are discussed in terms of the following communicative aspects: grammar usage in section 3.1, choice of diction in section 3.2, coherence in section 3.3, punctuation use in section 3.4, and typography in section 3.5.

3.1 Grammar Usage

Grammatical integrity forms the bedrock of communicative clarity, professionalism, and credibility in all official documentation (Garner, 2016). As Crystal (2019: 202) observes, grammar is “the system of rules and principles that govern the structure of language use,” and without it, “there can be no effective communication.” In the context of Hansard reports, proper grammar not only facilitates clear communication but also strengthens the authority and legal defensibility of legislative records, reinforcing their status as reliable historical documents. This section identifies five recurring grammatical challenges observed across the Hansard reports reviewed: incorrect tense usage, poor sentence construction, subject-verb agreement errors, misuse or omission of prepositions, and incorrect or omitted use of articles.

3.1.1 Incorrect Tense Usage

Tense errors emerged as one of the most frequent grammatical problems identified. Tense, the verb form that expresses the timing of an action (Leech & Svartvik, 2002), is vital for accurately reflecting events in Hansard reports. Misuse of tense disrupts reading flow, creates ambiguity about timeframes, and can result in the misrepresentation of legislative actions or intentions (Azar & Hagen, 2017).

Examples picked randomly from the data include:

1. *The executive **has sat** on the chair and **sleep** on the job...*
2. *No member **rise** to debate, the document that **come** in yesterday, Hon [name removed] **speak** off record, **lapse** before we **paid**, we have **return** money.*
3. *...the hon. member who has just **spoke** about County health...*

In Example 1, the shift between “has sat” and “sleep” within the same clause disrupts tense consistency and interrupts the logical sequencing of actions. Example 2 demonstrates several tense errors (“rise” instead of “rose,” “come” instead of “came,” “speak” instead of “spoke,” and “return” instead of “returned”), which fragment meaning and obscure the chronological order of events. Example 3 features an incorrect past participle (“has just spoke” instead of “has just spoken”), further impairing clarity. Such tense inaccuracies not only confuse readers but also undermine the reliability of Hansard records by distorting legislative intent. When frequent, these errors erode the professionalism and authority of the legislative documentation.

3.1.2 Poor Sentence Construction

Another common problem was poor sentence construction, which frequently resulted in unclear, incomplete, or convoluted statements. Many sentences lacked logical syntactic structure, leading to ambiguity or even incomprehensibility. For example:

1. *I think the Chair-Budget listening to the arguments and what Hon. Mutua is saying, unlike what you are explaining. The amount we passed in the Report on the basis for us to change the Appropriation. So if the figure is deferent [sic] then, there is a question for us ask [sic]. Unless there is an explanation to it.*
2. *When we have an annual budget, last year's which we are finishing on June 30, we had Kshs.5.8 billion.*
3. *You can give a right of reply, the Leader of Government Business, after hearing about sentiments from the members.*

Examples 4, 5, and 6 highlight structural deficiencies that significantly diminish clarity in legislative records. In Example 4, fragmented sentences and poor clause coordination (“the Chair-Budget listening... unlike what you are explaining”) obscure the speaker’s intentions and disrupt logical flow. Example 5 contains an awkwardly inserted clause (“last year’s which we are finishing on June 30”), muddling the relationship between budget periods. Example 6 demonstrates imprecise referencing and coordination, creating uncertainty about who is giving or receiving “the right of reply.” Such linguistic shortcomings reduce the precision and interpretability of official records. When pervasive in Hansard reports, these problems can seriously erode their authority as official legislative documents.

3.1.3 Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

Subject-verb agreement (SVA)—the requirement that the verb form matches the subject in number—is a basic grammatical rule. Yet it was frequently violated in the data across Hansard reports from various CAs. Examples picked at random include:

1. *I believe Members **understands** what I mean.*
2. *...medallion was a payment that was to staff who **retires**. coo*
3. *The Chief Officer Finance and Economic Planning **enter** the chamber.*

Example 7 demonstrates a subject-verb agreement error: the plural subject “Members” is incorrectly paired with the singular verb “understands.” In Example 8, “staff who retires” mismatches the plural noun “staff” with a singular verb. Example 9 similarly exhibits an error, as “The Chief Officer Finance and Economic Planning enter the chamber” pairs a singular subject with the plural verb “enter.” While such errors may seem minor in isolation, their frequent occurrence disrupts reading fluency, detracts from the substantive content, and undermines the professionalism and authority expected of Hansard reports.

3.1.4 Misuse and Omission of Prepositions

The study found frequent instances of both incorrect use and omission of prepositions. Prepositions are essential for establishing logical, spatial, and temporal relationships within sentences, clarifying the connections between nouns (or pronouns) and other sentence elements. They provide critical context regarding direction (to, into, onto, out of, towards), location (in, on, at, under, over, between), time (at, on, in, before, after), cause (because of, due to, for), and manner or means (by, with, via) (Axelrod & Cooper, 2010). The following examples illustrate these issues:

1. *I was one member of the Budget Committee who was opposing **himself**. Mr. Speaker sir I think the honourable member is **out their order**...*
2. *...we have exactly three months **for** today to make a decision...*
3. *...we are constraining [sic] **on** time...*

In Example 10, the misuse of the reflexive pronoun (“opposing himself”) results in semantic confusion. Example 11 omits the preposition “of” (“out their order” instead of “out of order”), leading to an ungrammatical and unclear phrase. Example 12 uses “for today” instead of the correct “from today,” altering the intended timeframe. Example 14 substitutes “constraining on time” for the more accurate “constrained by time,” which distorts meaning. These types of errors reduce semantic precision, introduce ambiguity, and compromise the communicative effectiveness of Hansard reports. When frequent, such mistakes also undermine the professionalism and credibility of the records.

3.1.5 Omission or Unnecessary Use of Articles

Another recurring issue identified in the analysed Hansard reports was the inconsistent or incorrect use of English articles—namely, the definite article (“the”), the indefinite articles (“a” or “an”), or omission where an article is required. Articles play a crucial role in specifying meaning, and their misuse can lead to vague, ambiguous, or misleading statements.

For example:

- *She made a recommendation to Speaker on matter of importance.*
- *Committee gave report to members in chamber.*

In these examples, omitting “the” before “Speaker,” “matter,” or “report” compromises specificity and can distort institutional references. Such misuse of articles blurs distinctions between general and specific entities, diminishing both the clarity and precision of official records.

In summary, grammatical errors in Hansard reports—including incorrect tense usage, poor sentence construction, subject-verb disagreement, and misused or omitted prepositions and articles—seriously undermine the effectiveness of Hansard as a tool of democratic governance. These issues impede clarity, hinder reader comprehension, distort legislative intent, and erode the professionalism and credibility of the records. Ultimately, they limit public understanding, obstruct accountability, and weaken trust in parliamentary processes. Inaccurate records also expose Hansard to legal challenges, increasing the risk of misinterpretation of debates and legislative actions. Therefore, maintaining grammatical accuracy is essential for safeguarding Hansard’s function as a transparent, authoritative, and trustworthy record of governance.

3.2 Diction

Diction encompasses the selection and use of words in speech or writing—including vocabulary, tone, formality, and stylistic coherence (Crystal, 2019). In parliamentary settings, precise diction is vital for ensuring the accuracy, clarity, and professionalism of Hansard reports. Effective diction not only preserves the rhetorical style of individual speakers and the overall tone of legislative proceedings but also safeguards the integrity of the official record. Conversely, poor diction diminishes the communicative value of Hansard reports and can lead to misinterpretation or distortion of legislative intent and sentiment. This study identified three major forms of poor diction in the Hansard samples: inappropriate word choice, unedited code-mixing or code-switching without translation, and incorrect spelling.

3.2.1 Wrong or Poor Word Choices

Accurate word choice is fundamental to faithfully transcribing and representing parliamentary proceedings. In Hansard documentation, linguistic precision upholds the intent, tone, and meaning of legislators' contributions. Conversely, incorrect or imprecise word choice can introduce semantic ambiguity, misrepresent positions, and erode the professionalism expected of official legislative records. Numerous instances of inappropriate or inaccurate word choices were found across the sampled Hansard reports in this study. Selected examples are discussed below to illustrate these challenges.

1. *Thank you. Hon. Members, I now first put the question, propose the question that is the County Assembly **extends** the [county name mentioned] Supplementary Appropriation Bill 2015 from the provisions of Standing Orders 121(3) to **extend** committal of bill from public participation now put the question, that the County Assembly **extends** the [county name mentioned] Appropriation Bill 2015 from the provisions of Standing Orders 121(3) to **extend** committal of bill from public participation...*
2. *As well I want to **congratulate** the committee for allowing us an opportunity today in the Speaker's **Kamukunji** so that we also get an opportunity on various issues in this budget and create a consensus so that this budget will go through the process without much difficulties [sic].*
3. *When you come to transport, they are most [sic] in revenue earning in the County so if you **disregard** them to machinerics [sic], they can be repaired.*

In Example 1, the repeated use of “extend” is semantically inaccurate; the context requires “exempt,” a substitution that significantly alters the procedural meaning of the motion. Example 2 is characterized by poor phrasing and the use of informal language (“Kamukunji”) without sufficient contextual explanation, which reduces both clarity and the level of formality expected in legislative documentation. Furthermore, the phrase “congratulate the committee for allowing us an opportunity” is awkward and out of step with the conventional tone of gratitude; a more appropriate expression would be “thank the committee for giving us an opportunity.” Example 3 illustrates semantic confusion resulting from the misuse of the word “disregard,” which obscures the speaker’s intended message.

Incorrect word choices in Hansard reports impede comprehension and undermine the reliability of the official record. Persistent errors of this nature can erode the Hansard’s institutional credibility as a legal and historical document, risking misrepresentation of debates or policies and potentially resulting in legal or political repercussions.

3.2.2 Code-Mixing and Code-Switching without Translation

Code-mixing and code-switching are sociolinguistic practices in which speakers alternate between

languages during communication. Code-mixing typically refers to the insertion of words, phrases, or morphemes from one language into the structure of another, often within a single sentence or clause, while code-switching involves shifting between languages across longer stretches of discourse (Mesthrie, 2001; McCormick, 2001). Although these practices are widespread in Kenya's multilingual society, their unedited presence in Hansard reports—particularly when not accompanied by translation—undermines clarity, restricts accessibility for monolingual readers, and detracts from the professionalism expected of official legislative records.

Instances of unmediated code alternation, primarily between English and Kiswahili, were especially prominent in the coastal county assemblies. Notable examples include:

1. *We created new projects in the budget, so I agree with the... lakini tukumbuke kwamba tuliweka miradi ambayo itakuwa na recurrent expenses kwa sababu mradi huwa una recurrent na implementation figures. So ninakubaliana kwamba katika miradi mingine ambayo tuliweka inaweza kuibadilisha recurrent kwa sababu inataka monitoring, supervision kama vile dispensaries zote ziko na recurrent expenditure ambazo lazima ziongezeke.*
2. *Ni kweli Bwana Spika lakini if I read the statement inasema I request the textbook be republished correctly since the information is misleading kwa hivyo he has already given the way out.*
3. *...most of the information ilikuwa inabase na public participation ya wananchi and proposals from the Honourable Members na we had time tukashare hii information vizuri tukiwa Malindi... departments pia zinge present hii information ya pending bills... waweze kubreak down tujue nini ambacho hawajalipia.*

These examples feature hybrid constructions such as *kubreak*, *zingepresent*, *tukashare*, and *inabase*—none of which are standardised or accompanied by explanatory footnotes or translations. This absence of editorial intervention fosters inconsistency, diminishes formality, and limits accessibility for monolingual readers, thereby restricting public understanding and oversight of legislative debates. Additionally, persistent use of unedited mixed-language constructions undermines the perceived professionalism and authority of the reports over time.

To address these challenges, a comprehensive editorial policy is required to manage code-mixing and code-switching in Hansard documentation. Such a policy should mandate the translation of non-English insertions or the standardisation of their presentation to uphold accessibility, consistency, and legal soundness.

Correct spelling is equally fundamental to clarity, professionalism, and the archival integrity of written parliamentary records. In Hansard reports, spelling accuracy is essential for preserving and accurately interpreting legislative discourse. Misspellings impede reading fluency, obscure meaning, and detract from the formal tone and credibility of the records.

Although spelling errors were observed throughout the reports reviewed, a general improvement was noted in more recent reports. Examples include:

1. *...the executive can easily be able to mislead the assembly to [sic] adopting a budget that has deficit [sic] in documentation, probably giving a **lagoonner** that they might exploit [sic]...*
2. *One can bring facts here but they are taken as **here say** [sic].*

3. ...it had erected a structure with a **slap** [sic]...
4. This is not about money necessarily is [sic] also about **lobbing** [sic]...
5. **Irrigatable** [sic]
6. What's the **increament** [sic] all about?
7. ...we will have the **Nitti gritties** [sic]

Spelling errors such as “lagoonner” for “loophole” or “here say” for “hearsay” undermine the readability, legal precision, and historical reliability of the Hansard. Such mistakes can cause confusion, misinterpretation, and a loss of confidence in the accuracy and credibility of legislative documentation. Inaccuracies of this nature diminish the evidentiary value and institutional authority of the records. In sum, poor diction—including inappropriate word choices, unedited code-mixing and code-switching, and frequent spelling errors—poses a significant threat to the quality and integrity of Hansard reports. These linguistic shortcomings compromise clarity, distort intended meanings, limit accessibility, and erode the professionalism that should characterise official legislative records. Without rigorous editorial oversight and clearly defined linguistic standards, persistent issues with diction are likely to undermine public confidence in legislative institutions and the democratic process more broadly.

3.3 Coherence

Coherence is the logical and consistent flow of ideas within a text, allowing readers to understand it as a unified and meaningful whole. Achieving coherence relies on elements such as organised structure, clear use of connectors and transitional phrases to signal relationships (contrast, addition, exemplification, consequence, conclusion), and a consistent tone and style. Purposeful repetition of key terms—without redundancy—can further reinforce cohesion. In Hansard reporting, coherence is fundamental to faithfully capturing the intentions of speakers, ensuring accessibility for a diverse readership, and maintaining the credibility and professionalism of the record as an authoritative source on democratic governance.

Given the complexity of legislative debates, which often encompass intricate legal, policy, and budgetary matters, a lack of coherence in Hansard reports can obscure meaning, cause confusion, and weaken transparency and accountability. Incoherent documentation can hinder comprehension, erode trust in legislative processes, and open the door to misinterpretation or legal disputes.

This study identified four main linguistic and structural contributors to incoherence in the sampled Hansard reports: (i) rambling sentences (3.4.1), (ii) insufficient contextual clarity (3.4.2), (iii) unclear or inconsistent speaker attribution (3.4.3), and (iv) inaccurate or inconsistent presentation of financial figures (3.4.4).

3.3.1 Rambling Sentences

A recurring issue across many reports was the prevalence of long, unfocused, and convoluted sentences that combined multiple ideas without appropriate punctuation or syntactic clarity. Such rambling constructions undermine cohesion and clarity, making them difficult for readers to follow. The following examples from different county assemblies illustrate these challenges:

1. *Thank you Mr. Speaker Sir, having had the bill read, and having the draft here, Mr. Speaker Sir, the crucial ministry for Health here has been given KSh.21, 448,275 at this stage we can say this amount is very less [sic] as compared to other ministries though at this stage Mr. Speaker we are saying the time*

scheduled [sic] for this budget to this House actually I think the Schedule itself got us at hand [sic] so I want to propose Mr. Speaker that the work that has been done by the budget and appropriation Committee and the bill itself how it has been set it is a [sic] commendable job and I do also heko [sic] them.

This sentence exemplifies rambling structure, as it merges several distinct points—bill reading, Health Ministry allocation, budget schedules, and committee commendation—into one convoluted statement. Inadequate segmentation and imprecise word choices compound the confusion, making the intended message difficult to discern.

1. *Because of budget making process and because this is a House which will go as per the law and advice according to what the law stipulates, [sic] I would beg that this House adopts and resolves to have the CEC in charge put to task in order to explain the reasons to why funds cannot be decentralized because when they appeared before us they did not have any law backing their support on decentralization or have any reason as to why they cannot allow spending units to of course incur expenditure on their own.*

This statement exemplifies a rambling structure, marked by excessive length, repetition, and poor organisation. It attempts to address the budget-making process, legal compliance, and a request for the CEC to explain decentralisation, but merges these topics into a single, convoluted sentence. Repetitive phrasing—such as the redundant use of “because” and “to why”—further muddles the intended message and impairs comprehension.

1. *Thank you Hon. **Members** I now propose the question the [County mentioned] appropriation bill 2015 a bill of an act of [County mentioned] County to authorize the issue of a sum of money out of the County Revenue funds and its application towards the services of the year ending 30th June 2015 and to appropriate the sum by the county assembly for certain public service use and **purposes, thank** you Hon. **members I therefore** now put the question, that the [County mentioned] bill 2015 [sic], that the county treasury may issue out of the county revenue fund and apply towards the supply granted for the services of the year ending on 30th June 2015, the sum of Ksh. 4,105,740,243 only, and that sum will have been deemed to have been appropriated as from 1st July, 2015, for the services and purposes specified in the schedule without amendments (The motion passed, applause).*

While the activity described is a formal legislative procedure—voting on a motion by the Speaker of a County Assembly—the manner in which it is recorded is excessively verbose and difficult to follow. Improving readability would require breaking the statement into shorter, logically segmented sentences, allowing each complete idea to stand alone for greater clarity.

In summary, rambling sentence structures in Hansard records undermine clarity, professionalism, and reader comprehension. They make it challenging for readers to follow the logic of arguments or grasp the substance of legislative discussions. This not only diminishes the authority and accessibility of the records but can also lead to misinterpretations and reduced transparency in democratic processes. Moreover, ambiguous statements may obscure legislative intent, weaken accountability, and increase the risk of legal disputes, given Hansard’s status as an official legal reference. Ultimately, poor sentence construction compromises the reliability and effectiveness of Hansard records as transparent, accurate, and professional documentation.

3.3.2 Lack of Contextual Clarity

Contextual clarity is achieved by providing enough background information so that speech segments are understandable even to readers who were not present during the proceedings. Because Hansard reports

are often consulted as standalone documents, they must include relevant contextual details—such as background to motions, identification of individuals or groups, and concise event summaries. The analysis of numerous Hansard reports in this study revealed frequent instances of insufficient contextual clarity. Examples include:

1. *You have mentioned that a misfortune arose because you were part of the **Kinoti nine**, coincidentally even the seeker of the statement was also part of the group and I think 4th June, this occurrence of events happened within the last two weeks which was way after the deadline because the deadline was 4th June.*

The reference to “Kinoti nine” in this sentence lacks essential context, making it difficult for readers to discern who or what “Kinoti nine” refers to. Without clarification, the statement becomes ambiguous, forcing the audience to infer its meaning. While the term may be familiar to those with insider knowledge, it remains obscure to the broader public, risking confusion and undermining the accessibility of the record.

The reference to “the petition” and “yesterday’s petition” further highlights the problem of indefinite or vague references. Without specifying which petition is under discussion, the record leaves readers guessing about the subject matter. In official records such as Hansard, precise and explicit identification of topics—especially petitions, which may be numerous or complex—is crucial for clarity and transparency. Ambiguous references reduce accountability and hinder readers’ ability to follow legislative processes. For optimal clarity, each petition should be identified by its title, subject, or other distinguishing details.

Another concerning trend is the gradual shift in some Hansard reports toward resembling meeting minutes rather than verbatim transcripts. Instead of providing a comprehensive account of debates and deliberations, these reports often summarise only the final resolutions or outcomes, omitting the substance of the discussions that led to these decisions. For example, a record might simply state: “Vote R306-3062, Vote R306-3069, Vote R306-3064, Vote R306-3066, Vote R306-3071 agreed to,” without any accompanying documentation of the exchanges or arguments presented.

This move away from full transcription significantly undermines Hansard’s role as an authoritative and accurate record of legislative proceedings. It reduces transparency, deprives readers of essential context and the rationale behind decisions, and limits the public’s ability to hold lawmakers accountable for their arguments and votes. Furthermore, omitting detailed debates risks losing the nuance of legislative intent and the diversity of perspectives offered, thereby diminishing the document’s credibility and usefulness as a historical or legal resource.

In sum, contextual clarity is essential to ensuring that recorded speech in official documents, such as Hansard reports, is accessible and comprehensible to all readers, regardless of prior knowledge or participation. This requires providing adequate background, explicit references, and precise details to avoid ambiguity, enhance comprehension, and maintain the integrity and transparency of the record. Without robust contextual clarity, Hansard reports lose much of their value as reliable instruments for public accountability and historical documentation.

3.3.3 Improper and Inconsistent Attribution of Speakers

Accurate speaker attribution is critical for transparency and accountability in legislative documentation. However, the study noted various cases of improper and inconsistent attribution of speakers in Hansard

reports. For example, improper attribution of the speaker was observed in a Hansard report from one CAin: whenever members mentioned “Mr Speaker,” that is, the Speaker of the House, it was boldfaced and started on a new line. This created the false impression that the House Speaker was speaking. In another CA, a Hansard report would indicate that a member vacated the chair, but subsequent proceedings would retain the vacating member as the presiding member.

The study also noted inconsistencies in how speakers are recorded within and across CAs. In one CA, the Speaker, deputy, or temporary Speaker is identified by title and full name, while other members are listed with the honorific “Hon.” and their surname. In another CA, identification is inconsistent, at times using the first name, surname, or surname with an initial. In a different CA, members are recorded by full name and the ward they represent or marked as nominated. In another CA, only nominated members are labelled as such, while others are listed with the honorific “Hon.” and their surname. In yet another CA, some members are recorded with “Hon.” and their surname, while others are recorded with full names. Such improper and inconsistent attribution of speakers risks misrepresenting debates, eroding public trust, and weakening institutional memory, ultimately undermining the integrity of legislative documentation. Thus, CAs should adopt standardised guidelines for speaker attribution to ensure accurate, consistent, and reliable Hansard records.

3.3.4 Inaccurate and Inconsistent Presentation of Financial Figures

Financial accuracy is crucial for public accountability and legislative transparency (Fenuku, 2024). This study identified numerous inaccuracies, implausibility, and inconsistencies in the financial data presented in Hansard records. For example, in one county assembly, only Sh. 5,000 was reportedly allocated “for the drilling and equipping of boreholes” across the entire county—a figure that is clearly implausible. In another instance, a member reported that the Executive retained Ksh 400 million during the 2013/2014 financial year, yet subsequent years list only Ksh 1.5 million and Ksh 1.6 million, which are improbably low relative to the initial amount. This suggests a likely error, perhaps meaning Ksh 1.5 billion and Ksh 1.6 billion. Elsewhere, a Hansard entry records an amendment to a budget sub-total from “3,176,182,087” to “3,206,182.087,” where the use of a full stop instead of a comma significantly alters the intended sum. Additional discrepancies were found in the 2020/2021 Budget Estimates, with the total resource amount variously recorded as Ksh 11,371,341, Ksh 11,722,087,142, and Ksh 11,727,087,098, without explanation—indicating poor tracking of financial data. In another example, a motion to reduce a vote from Shs 155,100,100 to Shs 234,357,045.22 in fact reflects an increase, not a reduction.

These examples demonstrate how inaccurate, implausible, and inconsistent financial reporting in Hansard records can undermine legislative transparency, distort public accountability, compromise the integrity of financial oversight, and erode trust in democratic institutions. These anomalies highlight the need for county assemblies to strengthen financial reporting standards in Hansard production by implementing rigorous verification protocols, providing targeted training for Hansard staff on financial data accuracy, and instituting robust review processes prior to publication.

In summary, coherence issues in Hansard reports—including poorly structured sentences, missing context, inconsistent speaker attribution, and inaccurate financial data—undermine the clarity, reliability, and authority of these records. Enhancing editorial standards, enforcing rigorous transcription protocols, and establishing comprehensive quality controls are essential to improving the integrity of Hansard reports and reinforcing their role in promoting transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight.

3.4 Punctuation use

Punctuation comprises the system of written symbols—such as commas, full stops, colons, and apostrophes—used to clarify meaning, structure sentences, and convey tone. In formal writing, including Hansard reports, correct punctuation is essential for enhancing readability, coherence, and interpretive accuracy. It also reinforces a professional and authoritative tone, supporting the legal and institutional credibility of official records. This study found a pervasive pattern of punctuation errors across the Hansard reports analysed, with significant consequences for clarity and precision. The most common issues included: misuse of the comma (3.5.1), overuse of ellipsis (3.5.2), misuse or omission of the full stop (3.5.3), incorrect use of letter cases (3.5.4), use of undefined acronyms (3.5.5), misuse of colons and semi-colons (3.5.6), and missing apostrophes (3.5.7).

3.4.1 Misuse of the Comma

The comma is a versatile punctuation mark, used to separate items in a list, set off introductory elements, and clarify the relationship between clauses (Axelrod & Cooper, 2010). In the analysed Hansard reports, misuse of the comma was widespread. Illustrative examples are presented below:

1. Arbitrary placement of a comma, for instance after “committee” in: *“They [sic] two Committees, they [sic] have got to agree...”*
2. Incorrect use of a comma, for example, after “proposal” instead of a full stop in: *“You have to make your complete proposal, hold on Hon. [name mentioned]”*
3. Omission of commas, for instance, before and after “however” in: *“...Energy department is a vote of Fuel Levy totalling Kshs 82,069,411 however, no breakdown was availed to the Committee...”*
4. Omission of commas, for instance, after “day” and “due to this” in: *“...at the end of the day we are one party, we are one people, we are person [sic] and due to this it is important that...”*

Misuse or omission of commas distorts meaning, diminishes clarity and readability, and undermines the overall credibility of Hansard reports. At a systemic level, these errors can prompt misinterpretation of statutes, fuel potential litigation, result in the misrepresentation of historical records, and contribute to the erosion of public trust in legislative processes and representative democracy.

3.4.2 Overuse of Ellipsis

Ellipses (...) traditionally indicate omitted text. However, their excessive or inappropriate use can disrupt the logical flow of discourse and obscure the speaker’s intended meaning. In several county assemblies, ellipses appeared frequently across multiple pages of the same Hansard report, signalling either technical difficulties—such as inaudible audio recordings—or shortcomings in editorial oversight. Overusing ellipses undermines the clarity and reliability of the record, making it difficult for readers to follow debates or understand legislative intent. Addressing these issues requires investing in improved audio recording equipment and establishing clear editorial guidelines that limit the use of ellipses to genuine omissions.

3.4.3 Misuse or Omission of the Full Stop

The full stop demarcates the end of a complete thought or sentence. The study found numerous instances of misuse or omission of full stops in the sampled Hansard reports. Some examples include:

1. A comma is used where a full stop is needed, making the sentence unclear: *“Shs 129 million inakuwa Shs 179 million, mimi ile Report niko nayo kama hizi ndio pending bills ...”*

2. A full stop incorrectly separates a Kiswahili prefix from the English verb, is confusing: *“tunai. manipulate”*
3. A run-on sentence that would be clearer with a full stop after “infrastructure provision:” *“Mr. Speaker Sir, Infrastructure & Energy department has been allocated 11.9% of the development expenditure to improve on the livelihoods of [County mentioned] residents through proper land use planning and infrastructure provision the department of infrastructure and Energy...”*
4. The full stop after “funds” causes a hanging sentence, disrupting clarity: *“Conclusively, we have issues on [sic] emergency funds. That is [sic] established under County Government Act from Chapter no.114 to no.119.”*

This sentence exemplifies the need for appropriate full stops to break up lengthy, convoluted constructions. For example:

1. Thank you, Hon. Members. I now propose the question. The [County mentioned] County Appropriation Bill 2015 is a Bill of an Act of [County mentioned] County to authorise the issue of a sum of money out of the County Revenue Funds and its application towards the services of the year ending 30th June 2015. It also seeks to appropriate the sum by the county assembly for certain public service use and purposes. Thank you, Hon. Members. I therefore now put the question: that the [County mentioned] Bill 2015, that the county treasury may issue out of the county revenue fund and apply towards the supply granted for the services of the year ending on 30th June 2015, the sum of Ksh. 4,105,740,243 only, and that sum will have been deemed to have been appropriated as from 1st July, 2015, for the services and purposes specified in the schedule without amendments. (The motion passed, applause.)

Omitting or misusing full stops disrupts clarity and coherence, making Hansard reports harder to interpret and undermining their credibility as accurate records of parliamentary proceedings. The revised version demonstrates how proper punctuation enhances readability and maintains the professional standards expected of official records.

3.4.4 Incorrect Use of Letter Cases, Undefined Acronyms, and Missing Apostrophes

Uppercase letters indicate sentence beginnings, proper nouns, acronyms, and other key syntactic features (Axelrod & Cooper, 2010). Consistent and correct application of letter case ensures clarity and uniformity in writing. However, the study found widespread misapplication of letter cases across the sampled Hansard reports. Notable examples include:

1. *“Committee of the whole house”* – “House” should be capitalised because it refers specifically to a formal legislative body, not a generic house.
2. *“my mum grace”* – “Grace” is improperly in lowercase because it is a proper noun. Otherwise, it could cause ambiguity about whether “grace” is a name or a virtue.
3. *“Department of lands”* — “Lands” should be capitalised because it is part of a formal government department name. Lack of capitalisation weakens the specificity and authority of the reference.
4. *“This Report is very important.”* — “Report” does not require capitalisation mid-sentence unless referring to a formally titled document. Capitalising it unnecessarily gives the word an unwarranted emphasis
5. *“Mr. Speaker Sir, The Committee recommends”* – “The” should not be capitalised unless starting a sentence. It is unnecessary to capitalise; it disrupts sentence flow and misrepresents standard grammatical norms.

Incorrect use of letter case undermines the document's professional appearance and can cause semantic confusion or even legal uncertainty.

Acronyms should always be defined upon first use to ensure clarity for all readers, particularly those unfamiliar with the terminology. Failing to define acronyms reduces accessibility, potentially alienates the public, and risks misinterpretation of policy references. For example:

1. *"When I look at the Budget, [sic] O and M which contain..."* "O and M" (likely Operations and Maintenance) should either be entirely written out or consistently formatted to indicate its meaning clearly.
2. *"Lappset"* – This should be fully capitalised as "LAPSSET" and defined as an acronym for "Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor."
3. *"MTEF approach to budgeting... CIDP, ADP and FSP 2017."* These undefined acronyms are likely MTEF (Medium Term Expenditure Framework), CIDP (County Integrated Development Plan), ADP (Annual Development Plan), and FSP (Fiscal Strategy Paper).

Failing to spell out acronyms can confuse non-specialist readers and diminish Hansard's accessibility and reliability. As official records for governance, legal, and historical reference, Hansard reports should always explain acronyms to avoid ambiguity, uphold professional standards, and mitigate the risk of misinterpretation or litigation.

Apostrophes serve crucial roles in indicating possession and marking omitted letters in contractions (Truss, 2004). Their correct use is vital for clarity, as missing apostrophes can obscure intended meaning and hinder comprehension. The study identified several instances of missing possessive apostrophes, including:

1. *"Governors flagship program"* (should be "Governor's" or "Governors'")
2. *"Hon. **Members** office"* (which should be "members'" or "member's")

Such omissions distort grammatical meaning and impede interpretive accuracy, particularly in legal or financial contexts.

3.4.5 Misuse of Colon and Semicolon

Colons are used to introduce lists or explanations, while semicolons connect independent clauses or separate items in complex lists (Axelrod & Cooper, 2010). Misuse of these marks was apparent in examples such as:

1. *"When I look at the Budget; O and M which contain..."* – The semicolon incorrectly separates "Budget" and "O and M," suggesting they are distinct items, which is not the case.
2. *"For example; during the first year..."* – The semicolon after "For example" is wrong; a comma should have been used.
3. *"Hon. Speaker, for the Local Revenue Income Sources: Local Revenue is estimated to grow..."* – The colon after "Sources" incorrectly implies that a list will follow. Yet the next clause continues the sentence.
4. *"I faced the minister of finance and asked him; if at all we were..."* – The semicolon improperly interrupts a continuous narrative. It should be a comma or no punctuation to maintain the coherence of the event being recounted.

Overall, incorrect use of semicolons and colons creates ambiguity, disrupts logical flow, and can misrepresent the proceedings. This is especially concerning given Hansard's status as an official legislative record.

Errors in punctuation—including misplaced commas, full stops, ellipses, semicolons, colons, apostrophes, improper capitalisation, and undefined acronyms – undermine clarity, coherence, and interpretive accuracy in County Assembly Hansard reports. These problems not only reduce readability but also weaken Hansard's institutional authority as a legal and historical record. In legislative contexts, such mistakes can hinder transparency, cause misinterpretation of laws or budgets, and erode public trust in parliamentary processes. To address these challenges, it is essential to strengthen editorial standard, enhance transcription protocols, and provide targeted capacity building for Hansard staff, thereby improving the quality and reliability of Hansard records.

3.5 Typography

Typography—the art and technique of arranging type to make written language legible, readable, and visually appealing—plays a vital role in the presentation and usability of official documents. It encompasses elements such as typeface selection, font size, line spacing (leading), letter spacing (tracking), alignment, page margins, consistency, and pagination. As Bringhurst (2012:11) notes, typography is an interdisciplinary field that intersects with writing, editing, and graphic design, yet stands as a unique discipline.

Effective typography is widely recognised as essential for enhancing clarity, professionalism, and the formal tone of documents, while reinforcing institutional identity and tradition (Bringhurst, 2012; Carter, Day, & Meggs, 2014; Lester, 2020). Conversely, poor typesetting diminishes readability, weakens authority, and erodes the credibility and archival value of documents such as Hansard reports.

This study found that most County Assemblies (CAs) in Kenya lack consistent typographic standards within or across their Hansard reports. Only two of the eleven CAs analysed demonstrated consistency in typography throughout their reports. The following sections outline the most significant issues identified.

3.5.1 Lack of Pagination

Pagination, or page numbering, is fundamental for organising, accessing, and navigating written records (TechTarget, n.d.). In Hansard reports, pagination enables easy navigation, referencing, cross-referencing, and citation, thereby improving usability. Its absence hampers these functions and detracts from the authoritative and professional standard expected of legislative documents. Notably, Hansard reports from four CAs lacked pagination, which negatively affected navigation, referencing, cross-referencing, citation, and the institutional credibility of the issuing assembly.

3.5.2 Inconsistent Font Types and Font Sizes

Fonts convey visual tone and institutional identity. Serif fonts such as Times New Roman typically signal formality, while sans-serif fonts like Arial suggest modernity, and script fonts evoke elegance (Lester, 2020). Consistent use of font types and sizes enhances readability, establishes a clear information hierarchy (e.g., headings versus body text), and ensures aesthetic coherence.

The study revealed widespread inconsistencies in font types and sizes across Hansard reports:

- In three County Assemblies (CAs), multiple font types and sizes appeared in reports from the same assembly.
- In one CA, different fonts were used within a single page, while others employed either extremely small or overly large fonts.
- Another CA's reports exhibited irregularities in page alignment, font size, and inconsistent application of italics and bold.

These inconsistencies undermine readability, detract from professional appearance, and erode both the institutional image and the archival integrity of legislative documents. When pervasive, such flaws reduce the effectiveness of Hansard reports as instruments for transparency and accountability.

3.5.3 Inconsistent Line Spacing

Line spacing—the vertical distance between lines of text—plays a key role in organising content and ensuring visual clarity (Cullen, 2012). Consistent line spacing supports comprehension, distinguishes structural elements such as headings, and enhances overall readability.

This study identified several Hansard reports with inconsistent line spacing, leading to visual clutter and impaired readability. Such flaws detract from the professionalism and credibility of legislative records.

3.5.4 Inconsistent Text Alignment, Page Margins, and Cover Page Formatting

Text alignment (left, right, centred, justified), page margins, and cover page design all significantly affect the aesthetic and organisational quality of documents (Lupton, 2024). These features also contribute to the institutional branding of official publications.

The analysis identified numerous typographic inconsistencies:

- Reports from five CAs showed varied paragraph alignment, inconsistent formatting, excessive blank spaces, and irregular paragraphing.
- Some reports used inconsistent titles, alternating between “[County mentioned] County Assembly” and “County Assembly of [County mentioned].”
- In one CA, unnecessary tables further complicated the document structure and hindered readability.

Such inconsistencies impede navigation, confuse users, and dilute the formal identity and credibility of the issuing County Assemblies. Adopting uniform formatting, including standardised cover pages, would enhance document professionalism and facilitate access to institutional records. In summary, typography is fundamental to the readability, clarity and professionalism of Hansard reports. The study found extensive inconsistencies in typographic elements across County Assembly reports, including a lack of pagination, irregular fonts and sizes, inconsistent line spacing, poor alignment, varied margins, and non-standard cover pages. These issues compromise usability, diminish aesthetic value, and undermine institutional credibility, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of Hansard reports as official legislative records and tools for public accountability.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the language and communication challenges present in Hansard reports from Kenya's county assemblies, highlighting their significant implications for devolution, governance, and democracy. These challenges are not simply technical flaws but signal deeper systemic issues in the Hansard production process. As a result, the integrity, transparency, and legitimacy of county assembly proceedings are put at risk, ultimately eroding public trust and weakening democratic accountability. If left unaddressed, these problems may undermine the effectiveness of county assemblies as representative institutions.

In response to these findings, this article recommends several targeted measures. First, strengthen editorial oversight and implement clear guidelines on grammar, punctuation, diction, coherence, and typography for all Hansard staff. Second, prioritise capacity building and training to improve staff proficiency in language use and document design, including managing code-switching and code-mixing. Third, introduce standardised formatting templates to achieve consistency in report presentation—covering font, margins, line spacing, and pagination. Fourth, leverage technology such as grammar and style-checking tools to support accurate transcription and editing. Finally, establish regular external quality audits, involving academic or linguistic experts to review and provide feedback. Collectively, these steps can substantially enhance the quality of Hansard reports, reinforce the credibility of legislative records, foster public confidence, and support effective governance.

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