



**ASSOCIATION OF  
COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS  
& PROFESSIONALS OF NIGERIA  
BOOK SERIES**

## **Digital Communication and Indigenous Languages in Africa**

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### **To cite this article:**

Nurat Tosin Yusuf-audu, Omotola Ogunboka & Omolara Oluwabusayo Akin-odukoya (2025), Digital Communication and Indigenous Languages in Africa in Digital Communication and Governance in Africa: Reimagining AI in Communication and Governance ACSPN Book Series 10, pp. 183— 204 Retrieved from <http://www.acspn.com.ng>

(Institutional or Subscribed access may be required)

Please note that this is an electronic, pre-print version of this article published by the Evan Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited for Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN).

The ACSPN Book Series is exclusive to the Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria.

**ISBN: 978-978-690-135-0**

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Layout/Design: Ashroph De Grafico Ventures.

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## CHAPTER 10

# Digital Communication and Indigenous Languages in Africa

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The unique role of language as a cultural identifier, tool of communication, and a platform for historical continuity of a people has long been recognised and debated. Indigenous languages form the bedrock of societies' cultural heritage and identities, encapsulating history, customs, knowledge systems, and worldview of various ethnic groups. However, the advent of globalisation and its accompanying cultural homogenisation seemingly pose significant threats to indigenous languages. Nigeria stands as a microcosm of this

global linguistic diversity, with her over 500 distinct languages, a testament to its rich cultural mosaic (Ethnologue, 2022).

The co-existence of English and indigenous languages in Nigeria presents an interesting dynamic. English, as the official language, is the medium of instruction in schools, the language of legislation, judiciary, administration, and media (Omoniyi, 2019). Its widespread use reflects Nigeria's colonial history and the continuing influence of globalisation. In fact, there is an increasing preference for English among Nigerians, perhaps in addition to the Pidgin English especially the younger generation (Olatunji, 2017). Consequently, this preference for the English language has sometimes caused the indigenous languages to be relegated to the background (Sakwu, 2020).

Indigenous languages are repositories as well as purveyors of cultural heritage, historical narratives, and traditional knowledge systems of various ethnic groups. However, the onset of globalisation, coupled with the adoption of major languages in education and media, has led to the marginalisation and gradual decline of indigenous languages (Ethnologue, 2022). According to UNESCO (2019), approximately 40% of the world's estimated 7,000 languages are under threat of extinction, and most of these are indigenous languages. Nigeria, known for its linguistic diversity with over 500 distinct languages, has not been immune to this global trend. Despite the vibrant cultural and linguistic diversity in Nigeria, English, the official language, has dominated the education system, media, and formal interactions due to Nigeria's colonial history and the influence of globalisation (Ojebuyi, et al., 2019). This dominance poses a significant threat to the survival and development of indigenous languages in the digital era.

In global journalism training and scholarship, the major focus is now on digital media and the adjoining issues around big data and

data journalism. Nevertheless, Idris and Msughter (2022) remarked that research into the impact of new digital technologies on African journalism is scarce. Here, Idris and Msughter are referring to the mainstream African journalism in the colonial languages of English, French and Portuguese. While it may be true that research into digital mainstream African journalism is scarce, it is non-existent for the media operating in indigenous African languages. African journalism, generally, is seen as being in deficit as regards the emerging global information order. However, Salawu (2020) cautions that African journalists should hardly be viewed as second class Netizens. They have moulded Internet tools to suit their specific needs, devised ingenious technical solutions to overcome the idiosyncrasies of their situations, and continue to apply the medium effectively in various contexts.

Aondover et al, (2022) agree with Salawu (2020), adding that African journalists are determined to be part of the technological revolutions of the modern world. In a related development, Aondover et al, (2023) note further that what is particularly lacking are detailed qualitative explorations of how newsrooms (and their journalists) are adjusting to the new digital context of practice. This is more so for journalism in African languages. Salawu (2020) notes that not much attention is being paid to the study of indigenous language media in Africa. Little seems to have changed since that time despite the fact that the indigenous African language press has existed since 1837. It is therefore of little surprise that there has been a dearth of research into African language digital journalism as well as African languages in social media. This, for instance, is in contradistinction to what is found for minority languages in Europe, which already enjoy substantial research into their use in social media. There have been concerns around the development and sustainability of African language media. The political economy of media in Africa has not favoured them. It is the sorry state of the African language

press that triggers the thinking about the influence of digital communication on indigenous language in Africa. Concerns are also raised about the viability of African languages in the digital sphere, including social media. It is against the above background that this chapter examines the concept of indigenous languages in the African context; ascertains the endangerment and preservation of indigenous languages in Africa; interrogates the role of indigenous languages in identity formation; and explores the place of African indigenous languages in the era of digitization.

### **Concept of Indigenous Languages in African Context**

The concept of indigenous languages is deeply entrenched in the broader discourse about cultural heritage, identity, and societal norms. Indigenous languages are more than just tools for communication; they are complex systems that encapsulate the historical narratives, traditional knowledge, and worldviews of specific ethnic or cultural groups (Wei, 2019). The concept of indigenous languages has gained considerable attention in the last decade, especially in the wake of globalisation and the digital revolution. Indigenous languages are primarily understood as those that originated or developed within a particular geographic region and have been transmitted through generations by communities historically native to that region (UNESCO, 2019; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2020). These languages are not merely systems of communication but serve as reservoirs of cultural heritage, housing traditional knowledge, wisdom, and worldviews specific to their native communities (Umar, 2020). Notably, these languages are intricately tied to their places of origin, deeply embedded in the local landscape, resources, and traditions (Wei, 2019). This makes them unique repositories of environmental knowledge and bio-cultural diversity. Unlike widely spoken languages, indigenous languages are tailored to fit the specific needs and philosophies of their native speakers and have often evolved to encapsulate community-specific distinctions (Corson,

2019).

Moreover, many indigenous languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Tiv, Edo, and so on have strong oral traditions, often because they have either not been scripted or have only recently been written down (Gala, 2021). However, the absence of a written tradition should not be mistaken for a lack of complexity or depth. These languages often possess sophisticated structures and categories that offer insights into human cognition and social organisation.

Despite their cultural and linguistic richness, indigenous languages are increasingly becoming endangered. Several factors contribute to this, including globalisation, cultural assimilation, and the hegemony of dominant languages, often facilitated by formal education systems and media (UNESCO, 2019). Consequently, indigenous languages frequently lack institutional support, making them vulnerable to extinction (Krauss & Sallabank, 2021). In socio-political contexts, indigenous languages often exist in marginalised spaces. Language is a form of social capital, and when a particular language is marginalised, it exacerbates existing social inequities. The speakers of indigenous languages frequently find themselves at the lower rungs of social hierarchies, further endangering these languages as people switch to dominant languages to improve their socio-economic status.

The importance of indigenous languages goes far beyond mere communication. These languages function as crucial links to history, identity, and cultural continuity, serving as a lens through which people see and understand the world (McCarty & Wyman, 2019; Umar, 2020). In indigenous communities, language often serves as a repository for ancestral knowledge, folklore, rituals, and customs, encapsulating millennia of human experience and wisdom (Gala, 2021). The language itself becomes an archive,

where stories, ethical codes, and knowledge about local ecosystems are stored, contributing not only to the culture of the community but also to the broader understanding of human civilisation (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2020).

Understanding the importance of indigenous languages also means recognising their role in sustaining biodiversity. According to Moseley (2020), areas rich in biological diversity often coincide with regions abundant in linguistic diversity. This does not appear as a mere coincidence; indigenous languages often contain precise, localised knowledge about local fauna, flora, and ecosystems, which can be invaluable for contemporary environmental conservation efforts (Corson, 2019). This link between linguistic and biodiversity underscores the holistic approach of indigenous communities toward their environment, an approach that may provide key insights into sustainable living and resource management (Krauss & Salbank, 2021).

Also, the survival and robustness of indigenous languages contribute to the psychological well-being of their speakers. There is a growing body of research supporting the idea that strong language and cultural ties can have a positive impact on mental health, providing individuals with a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Maikaba & Msughter, 2019). Especially in an era marked by displacement, migration, and cultural dilution, the preservation of indigenous languages can serve as an anchor, helping communities retain their unique identities amid change (Gala, 2021).

Indigenous languages also offer a fertile ground for academic and cognitive development. Researchers have found that children who are proficient in their native languages tend to do better academically and show superior cognitive flexibility, as bilingualism or multilingualism can stimulate intellectual growth and enhance cognitive functions like problem-solving and

multitasking (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2020). In the sphere of international relations and human rights, the recognition and preservation of indigenous languages are key to social justice and inclusivity. Marginalisation of these languages often coincides with social and economic marginalisation of their speakers. The revitalisation and recognition of indigenous languages, therefore, are steps toward rectifying historical injustices and building more equitable societies (Corson, 2019).

### **Endangerment and Preservation of Indigenous Languages**

The endangerment of indigenous languages is a global phenomenon that has garnered increasing attention from linguists, policy-makers, and community leaders alike. While language endangerment is not a new issue, the scale and speed at which languages are becoming extinct have accelerated alarmingly in recent decades (Moseley, 2020). A wide range of factors contribute to this phenomenon, from globalisation and the prevalence of dominant languages like English, to internal community factors such as intermarriage and changes in traditional lifestyles (Krauss & Sallabank, 2021). Consequently, the issue transcends mere linguistics and enters the realm of cultural survival, human rights, and even ecological balance (Gala, 2021).

With the erosion of indigenous languages, there's not just a loss of words but a significant depletion of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge (Umar, 2020). Communities stand to lose not only their unique worldviews but also their specific ways of interacting with their environment, which often contain valuable lessons on sustainability and coexistence (Corson, 2019). Furthermore, language loss can have detrimental psychological effects on individuals, depriving them of their cultural identity and diminishing their mental health.

In this context, preservation initiatives become not merely academic or cultural projects but essential acts of social and environmental justice. The methods for preservation are as varied as the languages they seek to protect but often include comprehensive documentation, educational initiatives, and the development of media in the endangered language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2020). Newer methods, which have adapted to technological advances, include the digitisation of linguistic resources, the use of social media for language practice, and the development of language-learning apps focused on indigenous languages (Gala, 2021). Skutnabb-Kangas (2020) further states that modern technology can aid in language preservation. For instance, the use of participatory video documentation among indigenous communities has empowered local voices, ensuring that the documentation process respects the cultural sensitivities and taboos surrounding certain linguistic elements (Umar, 2020). Online platforms have also shown promise in connecting diasporic communities, allowing them to maintain their linguistic heritage despite geographical separation.

In the legal and policy sphere, strides are being made towards recognising the critical state of indigenous languages. Various governments and international bodies are gradually integrating language preservation into broader policy frameworks on indigenous rights and cultural preservation (Krauss & Salbank, 2021). Yet, much remains to be done, especially in implementing these policies effectively at the community level, where the impact is most deeply felt.

Economic factors often exert a significant influence on language endangerment, especially in regions where development projects and urbanisation lead to the mass migration of people away from their indigenous communities (Leonard & Haynes, 2020). As indigenous communities get dispersed and absorbed into larger, more diverse cities, the continuity of their languages gets

disrupted, and younger generations may grow up not learning their ancestral languages (Fishman, 2019). Economic pressures can also force communities to adopt dominant languages to gain better access to employment, thereby deprioritising their indigenous languages (Romaine, 2021).

Adding another layer to the conversation is the role of institutions and policy-making. While many nations have ratified international conventions to protect and promote cultural diversity, the translation of these principles into actual legislation and subsequent implementation remains inadequate (Davis, 2019). Not only do existing linguistic policies need to be robustly designed, but they also need to be backed by adequate funding and administrative willpower. A lack of resource allocation to preserve languages could render even the most well-intentioned policies ineffective. For example, education systems that integrate indigenous languages only superficially, without sufficient teaching materials or trained educators, can fail to instill a sense of linguistic pride among the youth (Schiffman, 2020).

Moreover, efforts to preserve indigenous languages should be cognizant of the social and gender dynamics within communities. Certain languages or dialects may be specific to particular social classes or genders and may require targeted preservation strategies. For example, women often play a key role in cultural and language preservation but may be excluded from official efforts due to social or gender biases (Rahimi & García, 2021). Within this complicated matrix of endangerment, technology and globalisation present both threats and opportunities. While the Internet and social media have the potential to dilute linguistic diversity by promoting dominant languages, they also offer platforms where marginalised voices can assert their linguistic identity. Furthermore, advancements in machine learning and natural language processing are being increasingly used to

document and analyse indigenous languages that have few living speakers left.

Therefore, the endangerment of indigenous languages is a multifaceted crisis that reflects broader social, cultural, and environmental challenges. It calls for a multi-pronged approach that incorporates not only linguistic but also social and technological solutions. The onus of preservation does not lie solely on the communities that speak these languages, but on society at large, as the loss of any language is a loss to global cultural and intellectual heritage.

### **Role of Indigenous Languages in Identity Formation**

The role of indigenous languages in identity formation is an intricate tapestry woven through generations of tradition, culture, and collective memory. Indigenous languages serve as potent instruments in shaping both individual and collective identities, acting as profound markers of belonging and differentiation. In particular, these languages are intrinsically linked to ethno-cultural identities, reinforcing the sense of community among members and distinguishing them from others. The relationship between language and identity is not unidirectional but rather dynamic and mutually reinforcing, as the process of identity formation can, in turn, impact language usage and preservation (Aondover et al, 2022).

The significance of language in the constitution of identity extends to the psychological realm as well. Language is a critical facet of self-concept, serving as a vessel for thought, self-expression, and thus self-definition. Psycholinguistic studies reveal that individuals who are proficient in their indigenous languages exhibit a robust sense of self and a profound emotional connection to their cultural heritage. Conversely, the loss or dilution of an indigenous language can lead to identity crises, psychological distress, and a reduced sense of well-being

(Leeman, 2021).

From a sociopolitical standpoint, indigenous languages often emerge as symbols of resistance against cultural imperialism and colonisation. In this sense, they contribute to the formation of a resistance identity that counters the hegemonic narratives often imposed by the dominant culture. For instance, language revitalisation movements are frequently tied to larger social justice initiatives, wherein reclaiming the indigenous language is seen as a form of reclaiming cultural autonomy and self-determination.

In the age of globalisation, where fluidity and hybridity characterise cultural and individual identities, indigenous languages can function as grounding elements. They serve as anchoring points in a world increasingly marked by dislocation, providing individuals with a sense of continuity and coherence in their lives. For diasporic communities, the maintenance of an indigenous language can act as a form of symbolic ethnicity, helping individuals to negotiate complex, multi-layered identities across different cultural landscapes. Moreover, indigenous languages play a vital role in indigenous methodologies and epistemologies, shaping the way knowledge is created, shared, and passed down generations. By doing so, these languages act as epistemic frameworks that not only define what is considered as knowledge but also who is acknowledged as a knower, thereby contributing to identity formation at both individual and collective levels (Omoniyi, 2019).

In expanding upon this intricate relationship between indigenous languages and identity formation, one can delve into the role of language in shaping social relations and power dynamics within communities. Specifically, indigenous languages often define social hierarchies, roles, and responsibilities in a way that external languages cannot. For instance, indigenous languages

possess unique vocabulary and idiomatic expressions that encapsulate culturally specific ways of interacting and respecting social norms. This not only establishes behavioral expectations but also affirms a shared understanding of social reality, thereby strengthening communal bonds (Piller, 2020). Cultural memory and heritage, which are key elements in identity formation, are also inextricably linked to language. Indigenous languages encapsulate folklore, stories, traditions, and rituals that have been passed down through generations. This wealth of cultural knowledge, coded within language, serves as a repository that reinforces shared historical narratives and collective identities. The absence or diminishing of this linguistic heritage may create disconnect between generations, leading to a loss of cultural capital and ultimately impacting the collective identity of a community.

Another compelling layer is the impact of digital media on the relationship between indigenous languages and identity. The digital space offers both opportunities and challenges for indigenous communities in sustaining their linguistic heritage. On the one hand, social media platforms, websites, and online forums provide new avenues for indigenous languages to be shared and learned, thereby reaching younger generations and diaspora communities in ways that were previously difficult. However, the risk of linguistic dilution and appropriation in the digital sphere also exists, as does the possibility that the language becomes commodified or stereotyped, which can have deleterious effects on identity.

One should also not overlook the economic dimensions of indigenous languages in identity formation. In many indigenous communities, language skills are closely tied to livelihoods, as they facilitate access to traditional occupations and practices like farming, fishing, and artisan crafts. Therefore, the ability to speak and understand an indigenous language is not only a point of

cultural pride but also a practical necessity that shapes one's role and status within the community. Indigenous languages serve as more than mere tools for communication; they are, in essence, complex and multifaceted constructs deeply entwined with the formation and expression of identity. They shape and are shaped by psychosocial, cultural, and political contexts, influencing how individuals see themselves and how they are seen by others.

### **Indigenous Languages in the Digital Age**

The digital age has drastically altered the landscape in which indigenous languages exist, creating a new realm of possibilities and challenges for their preservation and promotion. The advent of digital technologies has introduced innovative methods for language documentation, educational dissemination, and global outreach. However, this expansion into digital spaces also triggers concerns about digital divides, cultural appropriation, and the potential dilution of linguistic purity.

One of the most profound impacts of digital technology on indigenous languages is its role in documentation. For languages that are orally transmitted and lack a written form or established orthography, digital recording technologies have been indispensable. They offer a way to capture the language in its spoken form, often complete with its associated cultural contexts like storytelling or ceremonial rituals. These recordings serve as invaluable archives for future generations and can be a vital resource for researchers and educators.

Digital platforms also enhance the methods of language teaching and learning. Through online courses, mobile apps, and interactive websites, learners can now engage with indigenous languages without geographic constraints (Wyman et al., 2021). These platforms use multimedia elements such as audio, video, and interactive exercises to facilitate a comprehensive learning experience. Yet, it's essential to acknowledge that digital language

learning resources often need to be designed with cultural sensitivity, to ensure they are in line with the sociocultural norms and teaching traditions of each indigenous community (Restrepo Ramos, 2019).

While digital platforms make indigenous languages more accessible to global audiences, they also bring about the issue of cultural appropriation. The online dissemination of cultural content sometimes results in decontextualised and commodified uses of indigenous languages. Phrases or symbols may be used in ways that lack the cultural understanding or respect traditionally accorded to them (Rheingold, 2019). This trivialises the cultural value of the language and may also lead to misconceptions or stereotypes.

The digital age also raises the question of who controls the narrative. With the increased visibility of indigenous languages online, there is a parallel rise in non-indigenous voices participating in these digital spaces. While such participation can enrich the conversation and broaden support for language preservation efforts, it also risks skewing the narrative away from the indigenous perspective (Loh & Harmon, 2020). Therefore, digital platforms must prioritise indigenous voices and provide mechanisms for the community to moderate and guide the discussion surrounding their own languages.

Another concern is the digital divide that could exacerbate existing inequalities. Access to digital technology is often limited in remote or economically disadvantaged indigenous communities (Gala, 2019). This limits their ability to participate in digital language preservation initiatives and widens the gap between those who can benefit from digital tools and those who cannot. Despite the challenges, the potential benefits of digital technology for the revitalisation and propagation of indigenous languages are enormous. In an increasingly globalised world, the

digital platform can serve as a counterforce against language erosion by connecting dispersed speakers and incentivizing younger generations to engage with their linguistic heritage (Pérez Báez, 2020).

As digital technology evolves at an exponential pace, there is an emerging perspective on how its tools and platforms can be better utilised to serve indigenous languages in a more sustainable and equitable way. Not only does digital technology facilitate the preservation of indigenous languages, but it also offers new avenues for creativity, enabling the development of indigenous literature, art, and media in native languages (Smith, 2019). This has been particularly impactful in the digital communication, where platforms like YouTube and podcasting services have allowed for the production of content in indigenous languages that might not find space in mainstream media outlets. Such content serves multiple functions. It entertains, educates, and also plays a pivotal role in normalising the use of indigenous languages in contemporary settings (Chinn & Faircloth, 2021).

However, the expansion of indigenous languages into the digital realm presents concerns about authenticity and purity. As languages evolve and adapt to fit into digital communication styles and platforms, there are discussions within communities about what constitutes the 'correct' form of the language (Hogan-Brun et al., 2019). In social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, where brevity is prized, indigenous languages are often shortened or combined with English or other dominant languages. Such hybrid languages, while innovative, trigger debates within communities about their appropriateness and the potential loss of linguistic intricacies (Wise, 2020).

Moreover, the algorithms that govern many digital platforms are primarily designed to support widely-spoken languages, thereby inadvertently marginalising indigenous languages (Smith, 2019).

These algorithms control everything from auto-correct to search engine optimization, and their lack of support for indigenous languages can be a significant obstacle in the digital representation and accessibility of these languages. Furthermore, the legal frameworks surrounding digital content in indigenous languages are often inadequate or non-existent. Intellectual property rights are a grey area when it comes to the digitization of oral stories, songs, and other forms of cultural expression (Tsosie, 2021). This has led to instances where cultural heritage has been digitized and disseminated without the informed consent of the indigenous community it originates from, raising ethical questions about ownership and control in the digital space (Loh, 2020).

Yet, in the face of these challenges, there are also instances of best practices. Collaborative projects that involve linguists, digital experts, and members of indigenous communities have been effective in ensuring that digital language initiatives are both technologically sound and culturally sensitive. Various indigenous groups have initiated community-driven digital archives that safely store and control access to digital language resources, thereby retaining agency over their linguistic heritage.

The digital age offers a transformative yet complex landscape for indigenous languages. It presents unprecedented opportunities for documentation, education, and global dissemination, but it also raises ethical and practical concerns that need careful negotiation. As technology evolves, a collaborative effort among linguists, technologists, and indigenous communities is essential to ensure that digital platforms serve the interests of language preservation and cultural integrity.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the influence of digital media on indigenous languages in Africa. It argued that digitisation has a

profound impact on indigenous languages in Africa, offering both opportunities for preservation and revitalisation and posing challenges related to erosion and digital divides. Balancing these factors requires targeted efforts from governments, communities, and international organisations to ensure that digital tools and platforms serve as a bridge rather than a barrier to linguistic and cultural continuity. With the increased visibility of indigenous languages online, there is a parallel rise in non-indigenous voices participating in these digital spaces. While such participation can enrich the conversation and broaden support for language preservation efforts, it also risks skewing the narrative away from the indigenous perspective. The rise of digital media platforms has added another layer of complexity to this dynamic. Platforms like *Twitter (X)* and *Facebook*, with character limitations, have given rise to abbreviated forms and acronyms that have spilled over into everyday language. Text messaging and social media have also popularised emoticons and emojis, a non-alphabetical linguistic form that carry meaning and contribute to the tone of digital communication. This chapter concludes that the algorithms that govern many digital platforms are primarily designed to support widely-spoken languages, thereby inadvertently marginalising indigenous languages. These algorithms control everything from auto-correct to search engine optimization, and their lack of support for indigenous languages can be a significant obstacle in the digital representation and accessibility of these languages.

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