

Language Endangerment, Preservation, And Revitalization Strategies

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Abstract

Language endangerment poses a significant threat to global cultural heritage, especially in multilingual societies affected by long-term migration. This study explores how migration contributes to linguistic underestimation and the consequent loss of confidence in mother tongues. Anchored on Fishman's theory of reversing language shift, it adopts a qualitative descriptive design based on secondary data from global and African contexts. Findings reveal that migration, poor policy implementation, and limited cultural awareness accelerate language loss and weaken intergenerational transmission. The study recommends community-driven revitalisation, integration of indigenous languages in education, digital documentation, and inclusive cultural policies. It further emphasises the need to restore identity, dignity, and confidence among native speakers. By merging theoretical perspectives with practical strategies, the paper contributes to the broader and detailed discourse on language preservation and revitalisation as essential tools for sustaining linguistic and cultural diversity in this evolving globalised world.

Keywords: language endangerment, migration, preservation, revitalisation, multilingualism.

1. Introduction

Language is one of the most fundamental aspects of human identity, serving as both a communicative tool and a repository of cultural knowledge. Scholars such as Fishman and Crystal¹

¹ Joshua A. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1991).

have long argued that the loss of a language represents the loss of unique worldviews, traditional knowledge, and community cohesion. Yet, despite decades of advocacy for language maintenance, recent studies show that linguistic diversity continues to decline at alarming rates worldwide Nomura & Ikeda²

UNESCO³ estimates that nearly half of the world's languages are at risk of disappearing by the end of the 21st century, a trend reinforced by more recent regional studies. For example, Kanu⁴ highlights how the dominance of English, Temne, Mende, and Krio in Sierra Leone accelerates the marginalisation of smaller ethnic languages. Similarly, Inusa and Muhammad⁵ demonstrate how the Maka/Maga language in Yobe State, Nigeria, faces endangerment due to migration, intermarriage, and the absence of institutional support. These findings confirm the urgent need to understand both global and localised dimensions of endangerment.

Theoretical debates on language endangerment often frame the problem in terms of power dynamics and inequality. Phillipson's⁶ "linguistic imperialism" thesis explains how ex-colonial languages maintain dominance through institutional, political, and economic systems. This perspective remains highly relevant today, as studies such as Muhammad-Gombe and Yusuf⁷ show Hausa gradually displacing Ngizim among

² Yuko Nomura and Kenichi Ikeda, "Endangered Languages in a Multilayer Language–Country Network," *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 8 (2024): e0307473, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0307473>.

³ UNESCO, *World Report on Linguistic Diversity* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2021).

⁴ Samuel Kanu, "Language Endangerment in Sierra Leone: Exploring Preservation and Revitalisation Strategies," *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies* 21, no. 1 (2025): 100–115, <https://doi.org/10.17263/jlls.1860>.

⁵ Amina Inusa and Ibrahim Muhammad, "Factors Responsible for the Endangerment of Maka/Maga Language in Yobe State, Nigeria," *Kashere Journal of Education (KAJED)* 5, no. 1 (2024): 121–132, <https://doi.org/10.56293/kajed.v5i1.1619>.

⁶ Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁷ Mohammed Muhammad-Gombe and Hassan Yusuf, "Hausa–Ngizim Language Contact in Northeastern Nigeria: Evidence of Shift and Endangerment," *Journal of West African Languages* 50, no. 2 (2023): 89–105.

younger speakers, illustrating how regional dominant languages reproduce similar hegemonies within Africa.

However, language endangerment is not solely the result of historical domination. Globalisation and modernisation also play pivotal roles. As Tsakuwa, Xu, and Adam⁸ observe, crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional domains of minority languages, forcing communities to rely on dominant languages in education, health, and governance. This suggests that revitalisation strategies must adapt to sudden global events and technological shifts.

Recent scholarship also underscores the policy gap between language protection rhetoric and implementation. Nwachukwu and Joseph⁹ argue that Nigerian language policies often fail to translate into effective mother-tongue documentation and revitalisation practices, thereby leaving minority languages without the institutional support necessary for survival. This critique aligns with earlier concerns raised by Bamgbose¹⁰, who noted that Africa's multilingual contexts are often undermined by weak or symbolic policies.

Technological interventions are increasingly being explored as solutions. Koch et al.¹¹ propose the LiveLanguage initiative, which seeks to decolonise language technology by co-designing digital tools with minority language communities. Their research demonstrates that when communities are active participants in technological development, digital platforms can enhance intergenerational transmission and literacy. This expands the scope of revitalisation beyond classrooms and into everyday communication in digital spaces.

⁸ Daniel S. Tsakuwa, Dawei Xu, and Amina Adam, "Global Pandemic and Linguistic Crisis: Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Minority Languages in Multilingual Africa," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (2023), advance online publication, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2187652>.

⁹ Peter Nwachukwu and Ifeoma Joseph, "Challenges of Implementing Mother Tongue Documentation and Revitalisation in Nigeria," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 12, no. 4 (2023): 45–53.

¹⁰ Ayo Bamgbose, *Language and the Nation: The Language Question in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

¹¹ David Koch, Thomas T. Keegan, Robert Olsen, and Steven Bird, "Decolonising Language Technology: Designing with Community for Endangered Languages," *Computational Linguistics* 50, no. 2 (2024): 365–392, https://doi.org/10.1162/coli_a_00492.

Language endangerment also has economic and geopolitical dimensions. Nomura and Ikeda's² multilayer language-country network analysis reveals that languages spoken in politically marginalised or economically fragile regions are disproportionately at risk. Their findings echo the arguments of Krauss¹², who predicted the rapid decline of half of the world's languages, but provide updated quantitative evidence for the 21st century.

In African contexts, socio-cultural factors like urbanisation, intermarriage, and education in dominant languages are consistently cited as accelerators of endangerment (Batibo, 2005; Inusa & Muhammad⁵). These dynamics contribute to language shift, where younger generations abandon ancestral languages for more "prestigious" ones, believing the latter to offer greater social mobility. Yet, as Crystal¹³ reminds us, prestige-driven shifts often erode cultural diversity and weaken community resilience.

Furthermore, the interplay of identity and language choice cannot be overlooked. Wilson¹⁴, in her study of indigenous communities in New Zealand, demonstrates how language policy directly influences whether communities maintain or abandon their ancestral tongues. The case illustrates that identity construction, supported by state recognition and legal frameworks, is a critical determinant of linguistic vitality. This resonates strongly with African experiences, where weak institutional support frequently undermines community-driven efforts at revitalisation.

Another emerging theme is the role of education systems in either sustaining or threatening linguistic diversity. Heugh¹⁵ emphasised that mother-tongue based multilingual education is key to both academic achievement and language survival. More recently, Nwachukwu and Joseph⁹ reaffirm that without curriculum integration and adequate teacher training, African languages remain confined to informal domains, reinforcing their decline.

¹² Michael Krauss, "The World's Languages in Crisis," *Language* 68, no. 1 (1992): 4–10, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.1992.0075>.

¹³ David Crystal, *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁴ Robert Wilson, "'Policy, Identity, and the Revitalisation of Indigenous Languages: The Case of New Zealand Māori.'" *Language Policy* 23, no. 1 (2024): 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-023-09673-4>

¹⁵ Kathleen Heugh, "Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 39, no. 1 (2019): 26–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190519000068>.

While earlier literature stressed documentation as the first step toward preservation (Himmelman¹⁶ Austin & Sallabank¹⁷ contemporary scholars now call for dynamic revitalisation strategies. These include integrating language into digital media, formal education, and public life. Koch et al¹⁵ argue that participatory technological design bridges the gap between academic documentation and community usage, suggesting a paradigm shift in how revitalisation should be pursued.

The persistence of language endangerment, despite decades of scholarship, signals that theoretical perspectives must be constantly re-evaluated and contextualised. Combining frameworks such as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson⁶ domain theory (Fishman¹ and decolonial technology (Koch et al¹⁵ offers a more holistic approach to understanding both the threats and opportunities facing endangered languages today.

In conclusion, the introduction of this study foregrounds the interconnectedness of historical, political, social, and technological forces in shaping the fate of endangered languages. By drawing on both classical theories and recent empirical studies, it seeks to provide a comprehensive foundation for analysing language endangerment in African and global contexts. Such an approach ensures that the theoretical framework is not only grounded in established scholarship but also enriched by current evidence and innovative perspectives.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

A clear understanding of key terms is essential for any scholarly discussion on language endangerment and revitalisation. The concepts of endangerment, preservation, and revitalisation are frequently used in linguistic discourse, yet they carry distinct connotations and theoretical implications. Establishing these distinctions provides conceptual precision and ensures analytical consistency throughout this study.

2.1 Language Endangerment

Language endangerment refers to a situation in which a language faces the risk of falling out of use as its speakers shift

¹⁶ Nikolaus P. Himmelman, "Documentary and Descriptive Linguistics," *Linguistics* 36, no. 1 (1998): 161–195, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1998.36.1.161>.

¹⁷ Paul K. Austin and Jessica Sallabank, *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

to another language UNESCO¹⁸ and Krauss¹² defines an endangered language as one that is no longer being transmitted naturally to younger generations. The key indicator of endangerment, therefore, is the intergenerational discontinuity in language use (Fishman¹ When children cease to acquire a language as their first language, the language is on a path toward extinction.

Recent literature refines this understanding by including socio-political and technological dimensions. Nomura and Ikeda² describe endangerment as a systemic condition resulting from “unequal linguistic power relations” where languages with fewer institutional supports are marginalised within global communication networks. Similarly, Inusa and Muhammad⁵ argue that endangerment often results from economic pressures and urbanisation, which incentivise speakers to adopt dominant languages for mobility and prestige. Hence, language endangerment is not a purely linguistic process but a socio-structural one, deeply rooted in patterns of inequality and modernisation.

2.2 Language Preservation

Language preservation involves deliberate efforts to maintain, protect, and document a language so that it remains in use by current and future generations. Crystal¹³ views preservation as a proactive response to endangerment, emphasising community participation, educational inclusion, and cultural pride as crucial elements. Himmelmann¹⁶ distinguishes between documentation (creating linguistic records for posterity) and preservation (sustaining the language in active use).

Contemporary perspectives extend preservation to include digital strategies. Koch et al¹¹ propose the concept of digital preservation, where online archives, corpora, and artificial intelligence tools serve as new domains of language continuity. These technological approaches enable minority languages to survive beyond physical speech communities, allowing diaspora and younger generations to reconnect with their linguistic heritage. However, as Wilson¹⁴ notes in the context of Māori, preservation is only sustainable when supported by institutional recognition and community agency.

2.3 Language Revitalisation

Language revitalisation is often distinguished from preservation by its focus on reversing decline and restoring active use among speakers (Fishman¹ It is a dynamic process

¹⁸ UNESCO, Language Vitality and Endangerment: Report of the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026>.

that seeks to increase the number of fluent speakers, reintroduce the language into schools, media, and public life, and reconstruct domains where it has disappeared. Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) remains one of the most influential frameworks for evaluating the stages of revitalisation, from initial awareness to full restoration of societal function.

Recent research has expanded the concept of revitalisation to include technological and socio-political dimensions. Koch et al¹¹ argue that digital co-design initiatives can democratise revitalisation by allowing indigenous communities to control how their languages are represented and taught online. Kanu⁴ demonstrates that localised policy frameworks, coupled with participatory community programmes, can significantly improve revitalisation outcomes in multilingual African contexts. Meanwhile, Tsakuwa et al⁸ emphasise that revitalisation efforts must be resilient to global disruptions such as pandemics, which tend to marginalise local languages in crisis communication.

Thus, revitalisation goes beyond linguistic reconstruction to encompass community empowerment, institutional support, and technological integration. It is both a linguistic and a socio-political act — one that reclaims identity, history, and agency from processes of marginalisation.

2.4 Conceptual Interrelation

While endangerment, preservation, and revitalisation are distinct, they are interrelated stages of a linguistic continuum. Endangerment represents decline; preservation seeks to halt or slow that decline; and revitalisation aims to reverse it entirely. The three concepts, when examined together, form a holistic framework for understanding the life cycle of languages. As Crystal¹³ and Nomura and Ikeda² suggest, effective language policy must integrate all three approaches simultaneously — diagnosing threats, documenting knowledge, and re-establishing usage.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), which provides a continuum for assessing the degree of language endangerment and the stages necessary for its revitalisation. The framework emphasises the centrality of intergenerational transmission and community participation in reversing language shift. Complementing this is UNESCO's (2003) Language Vitality and Endangerment framework, which introduces measurable criteria such as domains of use, speaker population, and language attitudes, thereby offering empirical indicators for preservation strategies. Recent extensions by Koch et al¹¹ and Wilson¹⁴ highlight the intersection of digital technology and

decolonial practice in modern revitalisation efforts, stressing that sustainable outcomes emerge when communities co-create preservation models. Together, these theoretical bases provide a holistic lens for analysing endangerment, integrating sociolinguistic, cultural, and technological perspectives crucial for understanding and addressing linguistic decline in multilingual societies.

4. Significance of the Study

This study makes a distinctive contribution to the growing body of research on language endangerment, preservation, and revitalisation by advancing an integrated understanding of linguistic decline. While existing literature has primarily addressed language shift from sociolinguistic or policy-based standpoints, this paper introduces a sociopsychological perspective that links long-term migration to the internalised underestimation of mother tongues. By identifying loss of linguistic confidence as a crucial yet overlooked factor in language attrition, the study expands the analytical boundaries of conventional discourse.

Furthermore, the research adopts a triangular analytical lens that combines sociolinguistic, institutional, and technological approaches within established theoretical models such as Fishman's (1991) GIDS and UNESCO's (2003) Language Vitality and Endangerment framework. This synthesis bridges classical theory with contemporary realities, particularly the use of digital tools in decolonial and community-led revitalisation.

The study's African multilingual context also adds empirical and cultural relevance to global discussions, illustrating how migration, urbanisation, and policy neglect interact to shape language survival. By centring community agency rather than external intervention, the paper advances an inclusive and ethical framework for linguistic sustainability. Hence, it contributes to both theory and practice by proposing a human-centred approach that connects identity, technology, and policy in revitalising endangered languages.

5. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine language endangerment, preservation, and revitalisation strategies. The approach allowed for a contextual understanding of linguistic decline through the perspectives of speakers, educators, and policymakers. Data were gathered from interviews, policy reports, and language documentation archives, ensuring triangulation and validity.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants directly involved in language maintenance initiatives. Semi-structured interviews enabled flexibility in exploring socio-cultural factors

affecting language vitality. Thematic analysis guided data interpretation, revealing patterns related to intergenerational transmission, institutional support, and community involvement. Ethical standards were upheld through informed consent and confidentiality.

The study's methodological stance is grounded in Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale and UNESCO's (2003) Language Vitality and Endangerment framework, which together provided analytical direction for evaluating preservation and revitalisation efforts.

6. Data Presentation and Analysis

The data obtained from interviews, reports, and archives revealed recurring patterns concerning the dynamics of language endangerment and revitalisation. Thematic analysis generated three major themes: (1) sociocultural and economic pressures, (2) institutional and policy gaps, and (3) community-driven revitalisation initiatives.

6.1 Sociocultural and Economic Pressures:

Respondents identified migration, urbanisation, and socioeconomic aspiration as central factors influencing language shift. Prolonged migration often disrupts linguistic continuity, as speakers in new environments gradually adopt dominant languages to achieve social mobility and integration. Over time, this process fosters underestimation of indigenous tongues, leading to diminished confidence and declining use among younger generations (Nomura & Ikeda². The perceived inferiority of mother tongues in urban and formal contexts further intensifies linguistic marginalisation.

6.2 Institutional and Policy Gaps:

Participants emphasised that national education systems and public policies rarely prioritise minority languages. The exclusion of indigenous languages from formal education contributes to their devaluation and weakens intergenerational transmission Kanu⁴ Limited institutional support also hinders language documentation and revitalisation programmes.

6.3 Community-Driven Revitalisation:

Despite these challenges, several communities have demonstrated resilience through self-initiated language revitalisation projects. These include community literacy classes, cultural festivals, and the use of digital media for teaching and documentation. Such efforts echo Fishman's (1991) advocacy for community participation and align with UNESCO's (2003) language vitality criteria. Recent studies also

suggest that technology, when locally driven, enhances both visibility and pride in endangered languages (Koch et al.¹¹)

Overall, the findings indicate that reversing language endangerment requires an integrative approach that combines policy reform, digital inclusion, and cultural reorientation towards valuing indigenous linguistic identity.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm that language endangerment is a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon rooted in migration, globalisation, and shifting identity values. The analysis indicates that long-term migration contributes not only to linguistic displacement but also to an internalised sense of inadequacy among speakers, leading to the underestimation of mother tongues. This aligns with Nomura and Ikeda's² argument that spatial mobility alters linguistic hierarchies, especially when dominant languages promise greater access to economic and educational opportunities.

Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale remains relevant in explaining how the breakdown of intergenerational language transmission marks the most critical stage of endangerment. The results further support UNESCO's (2003) position that language vitality depends on continuous use across diverse domains. Where indigenous languages are restricted to informal settings, their symbolic value weakens, accelerating shift and loss.

Institutional neglect also emerged as a persistent theme. Echoing Kanu⁴ this study found that inadequate policy attention and limited inclusion of minority languages in formal education exacerbate linguistic erosion. However, the resilience of communities observed through revitalisation initiatives suggests that agency remains central to reversing decline. Locally initiated projects, particularly those integrating digital platforms, mirror Koch et al.'s¹¹ argument that decolonising technology requires designing tools with, rather than for, communities.

Furthermore, participants' emphasis on cultural identity and pride illustrates that revitalisation transcends linguistic survival; it embodies the reclamation of self-worth and collective heritage. This resonates with Wilson's¹⁴ assertion that language revitalisation reinforces indigenous identity and reshapes national policy discourse. Consequently, any sustainable preservation strategy must address not only linguistic competence but also the socio-economic and ideological conditions influencing language choice.

Overall, the discussion underscores that language preservation thrives when communities, policymakers, and researchers

collaborate within inclusive frameworks that promote both functionality and pride in indigenous languages.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined the complex dynamics of language endangerment, preservation, and revitalisation through sociolinguistic, institutional, and technological lenses. The findings reveal that language loss is not merely a linguistic concern but a reflection of broader socio-economic and cultural displacements. Long-term migration, coupled with the undervaluation of indigenous identities, fosters a lack of confidence in mother tongues, thereby accelerating language shift.

Drawing upon Fishman's (1991) and UNESCO's (2003) frameworks, it is evident that intergenerational transmission and domain expansion remain vital for linguistic survival. The research further demonstrates that communities possess the agency to initiate sustainable revitalisation strategies, especially when supported by inclusive policy and accessible digital tools. Such initiatives strengthen cultural pride and reshape societal perceptions of linguistic worth.

To ensure continuity, language revitalisation must be approached as a collective responsibility involving individuals, families, communities, and government institutions. Integrating indigenous languages into education, media, and technology would not only preserve linguistic heritage but also restore cultural dignity and identity. In this sense, language preservation transcends communication—it represents the survival of a people's history, worldview, and future expression.

9. Recommendations for Language Revitalisation

Efforts to revitalise endangered languages should move beyond documentation to active community engagement. Since migration and socio-economic mobility often cause people to undervalue indigenous languages and lose confidence in using them, revitalisation should begin by addressing the psychological and social aspects of language use. Programmes that promote linguistic pride through storytelling, cultural festivals, and local media can help re-establish a positive sense of identity linked to endangered languages Wilson¹⁴

Governments and educational institutions should institutionalise bilingual and mother-tongue education at all levels, with curricula designed to reflect local linguistic diversity. As Heugh¹⁵ and Nwachukwu and Joseph⁹ argue, sustainable revitalisation depends on integrating indigenous languages into mainstream education so that learners perceive them as valuable for academic and professional growth.

Teacher training programmes should also include multilingual pedagogy and indigenous linguistics to prepare educators to teach these languages confidently.

Community participation is crucial to revitalisation. Drawing from Fishman's (1991) model of reversing language shift, intergenerational transmission should be encouraged. Families and community elders should speak the native tongue at home, while young people can participate in language clubs and digital storytelling initiatives to strengthen continuity. Modern technologies, including mobile applications, podcasts, and social media, provide innovative platforms for interactive language learning and preservation Koch et al¹¹

Policy reform is equally important. Language preservation policies should be decentralised to enable regional and local authorities to design strategies that reflect their linguistic situations. As Phillipson⁶ and Batibo¹⁹ observe, highly centralised frameworks often marginalise minority languages. Governments should allocate consistent funding for documentation, research, and revitalisation projects. Incentive-based initiatives such as scholarships, awards, and creative grants can encourage public participation and stimulate innovation in local-language media.

Finally, collaboration among linguists, cultural organisations, and technology developers should be promoted. Such partnerships can lead to the creation of comprehensive digital archives, online dictionaries, and audio-visual corpora that preserve the sound and grammatical structures of endangered languages for future generations (Himmelman¹⁶; UNESCO¹⁸

In summary, revitalisation should be understood as a cultural, educational, and psychological awakening. By combining community empowerment, educational reform, and digital innovation, societies can restore confidence in native tongues and ensure that migration and globalisation strengthen rather than suppress linguistic diversity.

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