

PROMOTING AND PRESERVING MARGINALIZED LANGUAGES IN MULTILINGUAL AFRICAN SOCIETIES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article examines the sociolinguistic processes shaping the promotion and preservation of marginalized languages in multilingual societies in Africa, with particular focus on a linguistically diverse South African community. The community is linguistically diverse, with residents speaking Xitsonga, Northern Sotho, and Tshivenda, which are commonly used for communication in homes, schools, and local businesses. It investigated how social identity, community participation, and cultural contexts influenced language maintenance, intergenerational transmission, and revitalization. The study employed a mixed-methods ethnographic design, combining sociolinguistic surveys and in-depth interviews. The analysis further explored how speakers navigated sociocultural boundaries within complex multilingual networks and how dominant language ideologies shaped perceptions of legitimacy and value. Findings indicate that strong, dense social networks, particularly family, peer, and community interactions are the most significant predictors of language vitality. Participants embedded in supportive networks demonstrated greater linguistic engagement, cultural affiliation, and active transmission practices. Positive attitudes and linguistic pride supported preservation, while stigma and limited institutional support accelerated the language shift. Overall, the study demonstrates that language sustainability depends on both individual choices and broader social-structural conditions. The study recommends inclusive policies, community initiatives, and expanded opportunities for meaningful language use to safeguard endangered African languages.

Keywords: *Africa; marginalized languages; multilingualism; preservation; sociolinguistics.*

1. Introduction

Promoting and preserving marginalized languages in multilingual African societies is increasingly understood as a socially situated process beyond technical documentation. Sociolinguistics offers a critical framework for examining how languages are maintained, transmitted, and revitalized within the social, cultural, and political conditions that shape everyday communication. Norton (2013) demonstrates that language practices are tied to

identity, power, and community participation, challenging structural approaches to preservation. Access to meaningful interaction and linguistic capital is shaped by broader social forces. From this perspective, factors such as identity, social networks, social class, and community motivation emerge as central to the vitality of minoritized languages. Building on these foundations, sociolinguistic approaches emphasize that language sustainability is not solely an individual responsibility but a collective social process involving the negotiation of belonging, cultural heritage, and legitimacy. Speakers' willingness to transmit languages depends on authentic interaction opportunities and their position within social networks. However, these experiences are mediated by wider social variables, including age, gender, ethnicity, and class, as well as entrenched power relations in multilingual societies. Dominant languages typically receive greater institutional support, while marginalized languages face stigma and exclusion from formal domains. In South Africa, despite recognition of eleven official languages, colonial and apartheid legacies have entrenched English as the primary language of socioeconomic mobility. Despite the recognition of eleven official languages, colonial and apartheid legacies have entrenched English as the primary language of socioeconomic mobility, often at the expense of African languages. Such pressures intensify language shift while underscoring the importance of family, community networks, and local initiatives in sustaining linguistic heritage. Fishman (1991) emphasizes that intergenerational transmission and community-based practices are essential for reversing language shift. Although global interest in language revitalization is growing, empirical research on African sociolinguistic conditions remains limited. Addressing this gap is essential for developing inclusive and socially responsive frameworks for language policy and education. This study investigates how identity, networks, class, and community motivation shape the vitality of marginalized languages, offering evidence-based recommendations for safeguarding Africa's linguistic diversity.

2. Literature review

Africa is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world, with over 2,000 languages spoken across the continent. Multilingualism is therefore a normal and widespread feature of everyday communication in many African societies, where individuals often use several languages in homes, communities, schools, and workplaces. Scholars note that multilingual repertoires are developed through daily social interaction as well as formal education systems (Heugh, 2019). Despite this diversity, colonial history and postcolonial governance structures have contributed to the dominance of European languages such as English, French, and Portuguese in education, government, and economic domains. This linguistic hierarchy has led to the marginalization of many indigenous African languages. Recent sociolinguistic research increasingly frames language preservation as a matter of linguistic justice and educational equity. Scholars argue that when indigenous languages are excluded from education and official communication, speakers of those languages may experience reduced access to knowledge, social mobility, and political participation (Reilly, Chimbutane & Rubagumya, 2024). Consequently, promoting indigenous languages is not only a cultural concern but also an important strategy for addressing historical inequalities in multilingual African societies.

2.1 Sociolinguistic Theory and Linguistic Justice

Contemporary sociolinguistic theory emphasizes the relationship between language, power, and social inequality. In multilingual African societies, linguistic hierarchies often privilege globally dominant languages while marginalizing local languages spoken by rural or minority communities. Scholars argue that these hierarchies reproduce broader social inequalities because language is closely tied to access to education, employment, and knowledge production. Recent research highlights the concept of epistemic or linguistic justice, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing marginalized languages as legitimate mediums for knowledge and learning (Erling, Reilly & Chimbutane, 2024). Linguistic justice frameworks challenge colonial language ideologies that treat African languages as inferior or unsuitable for academic communication. In the context of African education systems, sociolinguists increasingly advocate for multilingual pedagogies that recognize learners' linguistic repertoires. Translanguaging practices where learners move flexibly between languages to construct meaning—have been shown to enhance participation and comprehension in multilingual classrooms (Chimbutane, 2018). Such approaches challenge traditional monolingual policies that require learners to abandon their home languages in favor of dominant languages such as English. Recent studies also emphasize the importance of language-supportive pedagogy, which integrates multiple languages into teaching practices to support conceptual understanding and academic literacy development (Deutschmann et al., 2024). These theoretical developments highlight the importance of viewing multilingualism as a resource rather than a barrier to education.

2.2 Language, Identity, and Cultural Heritage

Language plays a central role in shaping cultural identity, social belonging, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. In many African communities, indigenous languages serve as vehicles for oral traditions, historical narratives, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural values. The decline of minority languages therefore often leads to the loss of cultural heritage and collective memory. Recent research on endangered languages emphasizes that language loss can have profound social and cultural consequences. Studies indicate that globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of major languages contribute significantly to language shift in minority communities (Awal, 2024). When younger generations adopt dominant languages in education and employment contexts, intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages may weaken. African case studies illustrate how language revitalization can strengthen cultural identity. For example, community-based initiatives to revive the siPhuthi language in Lesotho and parts of South Africa demonstrate how language documentation, orthography development, and community engagement can support language preservation. These initiatives involve local speakers in recording oral histories and developing educational materials, helping restore pride in linguistic heritage (Mohale, 2026). In South Africa, indigenous languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Tshivenda continue to function as important markers of identity despite the strong influence of English in education and professional environments. Scholars argue that strengthening these languages in schools and public institutions can help reinforce cultural identity and social inclusion.

2.3 Social Networks and Community Language Practices

Sociolinguistic research emphasizes that language maintenance depends not only on formal policies but also on everyday communication practices within communities. Families, social networks, religious institutions, and local media play important roles in sustaining minority languages across generations. In many African societies, community radio stations broadcasting in indigenous languages have become important platforms for cultural expression and language maintenance. These media spaces enable speakers to discuss local issues, share traditional knowledge, and promote linguistic pride. Social networks also facilitate informal language learning among children through storytelling, music, and community events. However, urbanization and migration have transformed language use in many African cities. Urban multilingual environments often encourage code-switching and hybrid linguistic practices, where speakers mix multiple languages in everyday communication. While these practices demonstrate linguistic creativity, they can also accelerate language shift toward widely used languages such as English or Kiswahili. Recent research on multilingual learning in Africa highlights how learners' linguistic repertoires can be integrated into classroom interaction through collaborative learning strategies and translanguaging practices (Probyn, 2024). Recognizing these multilingual practices allows educators to build on students' existing linguistic knowledge rather than suppressing it.

2.4 Language Policy and Multilingual Education

Language policy plays a critical role in determining the status and use of languages within national education systems. Many African countries have adopted multilingual language policies that formally recognize indigenous languages. However, implementation remains uneven due to limited resources, political priorities, and institutional constraints. Research consistently demonstrates that mother-tongue-based multilingual education improves learning outcomes and promotes linguistic inclusion. Learners who begin their education in their first language often demonstrate better comprehension, higher academic achievement, and greater participation in classroom discussions (Heugh, 2019). In South Africa, the constitution recognizes eleven official languages and promotes multilingualism in education. Despite this progressive policy framework, English remains dominant as the language of learning and teaching in many schools, particularly after the early grades. This transition can create learning difficulties for students who speak African languages at home. Comparative research across sub-Saharan Africa also highlights innovative approaches to multilingual education. Studies show that language-supportive pedagogies and multilingual curriculum frameworks can improve educational access while maintaining linguistic diversity (Deutschmann et al., 2024).

2.5 Language Revitalization and Contemporary Initiatives

Language revitalization refers to deliberate efforts to reverse language shift and promote the continued use of endangered languages. These initiatives often include language documentation, literacy programs, curriculum development, and digital language technologies. Technological developments are increasingly playing a role in supporting African languages. Recent projects have created multilingual datasets and language technologies capable of processing hundreds of African languages, helping increase their representation in digital communication and artificial intelligence systems (Adebara et al., 2022). Researchers also emphasize that successful language revitalization depends on community participation and

institutional support. Local communities must play a central role in language planning initiatives, including decisions about orthography development, educational materials, and language teaching programs. Universities, cultural organizations, and government institutions across Africa are increasingly involved in promoting indigenous languages through research programs, academic publishing, and curriculum reform. These initiatives reflect growing recognition that linguistic diversity is an important intellectual and cultural resource. Recent scholarship demonstrates that promoting and preserving marginalized languages in multilingual African societies requires a multidimensional sociolinguistic approach. Sociolinguistic theory highlights the relationship between language and power, while research on identity emphasizes the cultural significance of indigenous languages. Social networks and everyday communication practices influence language maintenance, while language policy and education systems shape the institutional status of languages. Studies published between 2018 and 2026 increasingly emphasize linguistic justice, multilingual pedagogy, and community-driven language revitalization as key strategies for addressing linguistic inequality in Africa. Strengthening indigenous languages in education, media, and digital spaces can therefore contribute to both cultural preservation and more inclusive knowledge systems.

3. Research Method

This study employed a mixed-methods ethnographic design to examine how identity, participation, and local practices influence language preservation. Ethnography captures lived sociocultural realities, while quantitative measures reveal patterns linking social variables to language vitality. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data allowed the study to document both everyday language use and measurable indicators of transmission, attitudes, and network strength. This design ensured a holistic account of how social environments enabled or constrained the sustainability of minoritized languages.

3.1 Research Setting and Participants

3.1.1 Setting

The study was conducted in a peri-urban community in Limpopo Province, South Africa, where Xitsonga, Sepedi, and Tshivenda coexist with English. Data were collected at a public secondary school and surrounding community spaces where local African languages (Xitsonga, Sepedi, and Tshivenda) were used alongside English in both formal and informal domains. This setting provided an appropriate site for examining intergenerational language use and shifting patterns of linguistic practice.

3.1.2 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who:

- a) were speakers of at least one marginalized African language,
- b) resided within the target community, and
- c) represented varying degrees of language use, attitudes, and involvement in heritage language activities.

3.1.3 Participants

The survey sample consisted of 84 participants, representing a substantial proportion of the eligible youth population within the study site. This number provided sufficient diversity of responses to identify patterns and trends relevant to the research questions. In addition, 18 focal participants were selected purposively for in-depth engagement. This smaller group enabled detailed qualitative exploration, and thematic saturation was reached as similar themes began to recur across interviews and discussions. The study focused on youth aged 15–18 because they represent the primary group directly engaged with the educational and social dynamics under investigation. This age group is also developmentally capable of reflecting on their experiences and articulating their perspectives. While the survey targeted youth participants, teachers and community elders were consulted through interviews and discussions to provide contextual insight and to help interpret the experiences reported by the youth. Their perspectives complemented the youth data by offering broader institutional and cultural viewpoints.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

3.2.1 Sociolinguistic Surveys (Quantitative)

The survey measured frequency of heritage language use, attitudes, transmission, and social network strength. Network-mapping questions included: “Who do you speak your home language with daily?”, “How often?”, and “In which settings?” Network strength was operationalized through frequency, multiplexity, and functional diversity of ties. Such measures have been shown to predict language sustainability (Kircher & Zipp, 2022).

3.2.2 In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative)

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with learners, teachers, and community elders to obtain diverse perspectives on language identity, challenges to language maintenance, and strategies for language revitalization. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes while ensuring consistency across interviews. By incorporating multiple stakeholder groups, the interviews facilitated data triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings through the comparison and validation of perspectives regarding language use, transmission, and preservation efforts.

3.2.3 Ethnographic Observation and Fieldnotes

Ethnographic observations over 8–10 weeks documented classroom, home, and community language practices. Fieldnotes documented naturally occurring language practices, peer interaction, and cultural events. Selected activities were audio-recorded to capture authentic language use, consistent with contemporary ethnographic approaches to language vitality research (Hult & Johnson, 2021).

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

3.3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using statistical techniques to identify patterns and relationships among variables. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages,

means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize participant responses. Inferential analysis was conducted using Pearson correlation to examine relationships between key variables, while regression analysis was employed to explore the extent to which selected factors predicted youth outcomes. These analyses strengthened the reliability of the findings by providing measurable evidence of relationships within the dataset.

3.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Coding was cross-checked by multiple researchers to ensure reliability. This process enabled systematic interpretation of participants' experiences and meanings attached to language maintenance.

3.3.3 Integration of Findings

A triangulation strategy integrated quantitative and qualitative strands including statistical patterns were interpreted alongside narrative accounts to explain how network density and positive attitudes supported everyday language use. Convergent and divergent findings were compared to producing a comprehensive understanding of sociolinguistic influences on preservation.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical clearance, informed consent, anonymisation, and member checking ensured credibility and trustworthiness. These procedures enhanced credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the quantitative findings from the sociolinguistic survey and community social network analysis (SNA), followed by qualitative insights from interviews and ethnographic observations. Results are interpreted through contemporary scholarship on language vitality, language policy, and community-based revitalization in African multilingual contexts. Specifically, the discussion draws on recent work linking language maintenance to identity, network density, and institutional support (De Korne, 2021; Kircher & Zipp, 2022; Makoni & Pennycook, 2020).

4.1 Summary of Quantitative Findings

Correlation Coefficients between Key Variables

Variables Compared	Correlation (r)
Social Network Strength ↔ Heritage Language Use	0.64
Home Exposure ↔ Heritage Language Use	0.58
Peer Interaction Frequency ↔ Language Vitality	0.55
Positive Language Attitudes ↔ Transmission Intentions	0.49
Media/Local Content Engagement ↔ Language Use	0.52

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between social and environmental factors and heritage language vitality among youth participants (N =

84). Statistical significance was evaluated at 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$). The results indicate several moderate to strong positive relationships between the examined variables. Social network strength showed the strongest correlation with heritage language use ($r = 0.64$), suggesting that youth embedded in stronger social networks are more likely to maintain regular use of the heritage language. Home exposure also demonstrated a strong relationship with heritage language use ($r = 0.58$), highlighting the importance of family environments in language maintenance. Peer interaction frequency correlated positively with language vitality ($r = 0.55$), indicating that peer communication plays a role in sustaining language use. Positive language attitudes were moderately associated with intentions to transmit the language to future generations ($r = 0.49$). Engagement with local media and culturally relevant content also showed a moderate positive relationship with language use ($r = 0.52$). Overall, these findings suggest that social networks, home environments, and peer interactions are significant factors influencing heritage language vitality among youth.

To ensure clarity and analytical consistency, key variables used in the correlation analysis were operationally defined based on composite survey items measured using Likert-scale responses. These variables capture social, environmental, and attitudinal factors influencing heritage language vitality among youth participants.

a. Social Network Strength

This variable refers to the extent to which participants interact with family members, relatives, friends, and community members who regularly use the heritage language. It was measured through survey items assessing the frequency of communication in the heritage language within social networks, including conversations with parents, siblings, extended family, and peers.

b. Home Exposure

Home exposure measures the level of heritage language use within the household environment. Survey items assessed how often the language was spoken at home, whether parents or guardians actively encouraged its use, and the presence of everyday interactions conducted in the heritage language.

c. Peer Interaction Frequency

This variable captures how frequently participants communicate with friends or classmates using the heritage language. It includes both informal conversations and social interactions in school, community spaces, or social gatherings.

d. Positive Language Attitudes

Positive language attitudes refer to participants' perceptions, pride, and emotional connection to the heritage language. This variable was measured through statements evaluating whether participants value the language, believe it is important to maintain, and feel motivated to preserve it for future generations.

e. Transmission Intentions

Transmission intentions measure participants' willingness and intention to pass the heritage language on to their future children or younger family members. This variable reflects long-term commitment to language preservation.

f. Media/Local Content Engagement

Media and local content engagement refers to participants' interaction with media produced in or promoting the heritage language. This includes listening to local radio broadcasts, watching television programs, engaging with music, storytelling, community announcements, and interacting with social media or online videos created in the heritage language. Survey items measured how frequently participants accessed or engaged with these forms of content.

g. Heritage Language Use

Heritage language use refers to the frequency with which participants speak the heritage language in daily life across different contexts, including home, peer interactions, community activities, and media consumption.

h. Language Vitality

Language vitality reflects the overall strength and sustainability of heritage language use within the youth community. In this study, it was assessed through indicators such as frequency of use, peer communication patterns, and engagement with language-related cultural practices. This clarification ensures that each variable used in the statistical analysis is clearly operationalized, strengthening the methodological rigor and interpretability of the correlation findings.

4.2 Social Networks and Language Vitality

Dense social networks were the strongest predictor, confirming but also extending prior findings. Participants who interacted frequently with family members, peers, and community elders in their heritage languages reported higher daily usage and stronger intentions to transmit the language to younger generations. Survey responses showed that 62% used their home language predominantly within family domains, while 48% reported regular use with peers. Interview narratives confirmed that everyday interpersonal contact normalized language use:

“At home we always speak Tshivenda. Even my younger brothers answer in it. It feels natural.” (P11, Female, 16)

These findings align with recent sociolinguistic research demonstrating that language sustainability depends on strong community networks that embed languages within routine practices rather than formal instruction alone (Kircher & Zipp, 2022). Regular interaction provides spaces where linguistic competence and cultural meanings are reinforced.

4.3 Identity, Attitudes, and Linguistic Pride

Positive attitudes correlated with transmission intentions, while stigma reduced usage. Approximately 57% of participants expressed strong pride in their heritage language, while 21% perceived it as less useful than English. Positive attitudes correlated moderately with intentions for intergenerational transmission ($r = 0.49$). To ensure participant confidentiality, all interview quotations were anonymized using participant identification codes. The letter “P” refers to “Participant,” followed by a numerical identifier (e.g., P01–P18). These codes correspond to individuals who participated in the qualitative component of the study and do not reveal any personally identifiable information. Interview accounts revealed that identity affirmation increased usage:

“Xitsonga is who we are. If we stop speaking it, we forget ourselves.” (P06, Male, 17)

Conversely, stigma or perceived lack of economic value reduced use:

“People think English is the language of success, so some children stop using Sepedi.” (Teacher 2)

These patterns reflect contemporary understandings that language preservation is closely tied to symbolic value and identity negotiation. Makoni and Pennycook (2020) argue that African languages gain vitality when speakers perceive them as resources rather than obstacles to mobility. Thus, pride and legitimacy are key drivers of sustainability.

4.4 Socioeconomic Inequality and Access to Domains of Use

Exposure to English-dominant schooling and media reduced heritage language use, while cultural participation supported maintenance. Participants from households with stronger cultural participation such as attending traditional ceremonies or consuming local-language media reported greater use. In contrast, those with higher exposure to English-dominant schooling and digital environments showed reduced reliance on heritage languages.

“Most shows we watch are in English, so my little sister answers me in English even when I speak Sepedi.” (P19, Female, 15)

These findings suggest that structural inequalities and institutional language hierarchies shape everyday practices. Research indicates that without formal support in education and media, marginalized languages lose domains of relevance (De Korne, 2021). Thus, preservation depends not only on community will but also on broader policy environments.

4.5 Community Practices, Code-Switching, and Revitalization Strategies

Code-switching and translanguaging were observed in 45% of participants, functioning as adaptive strategies that sustain heritage language presence. Such practices align with recent perspectives that view hybrid repertoires as adaptive strategies that maintain linguistic presence in multilingual spaces (De Korne, 2021). Flexible multilingual practices such as code-switching and translanguaging help speakers navigate boundaries while preserving identity. Community festivals, local media, and storytelling empower speakers to sustain and transmit heritage languages.

4.6 Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

Findings support network-based models, extend identity research, highlight structural constraints, and validate community-driven revitalization. This section emphasizes social networks, identity, attitudes, inequality, code-switching, revitalization.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights that promoting and preserving marginalized languages in multilingual African societies is a complex, multifaceted process extending beyond education and policy. Language vitality is not determined solely by individual effort but is embedded within the social, cultural, and structural environments in which speakers live. Active use in homes, peer networks, and public spaces strengthens intergenerational transmission, while reduced opportunities accelerate language shift. The study has demonstrated that social networks, encompassing both strong ties within families and weak ties across broader community connections, play a central role in sustaining daily language use and facilitating the sharing of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Consistent interaction fosters competence, cultural affiliation, and ownership of heritage languages. Identity and attitudes also emerged as critical factors in language maintenance. Speakers' pride in their linguistic heritage, coupled with a sense of legitimacy and relevance in daily life, strongly influenced their willingness to use and transmit their languages. Conversely, social stigma, perceptions of limited utility, and the dominance of global languages can reduce motivation and weaken intergenerational transmission. These findings underscore that language preservation is intimately connected to social perceptions, community norms, and the recognition of cultural value. When speakers perceive their languages as respected, useful, and meaningful, they are more likely to invest time and energy in sustaining them. Socioeconomic and structural factors were found to mediate access to language-rich environments. Households and communities with greater access to media, cultural programming, and educational resources provide more frequent opportunities for heritage language use. In contrast, inequalities in infrastructure, schooling, and social mobility can limit interactional contexts and accelerate language erosion. This illustrates that efforts to maintain minority languages must address not only individual behaviour but also broader social and institutional conditions that shape language use. The study further highlighted the importance of community-led and contextually grounded initiatives. Cultural festivals, local media, storytelling sessions, and collaborative educational programs serve as spaces where languages are actively practiced, valued, and transmitted. Such initiatives empower communities to assert ownership over their linguistic heritage while fostering intergenerational engagement and broader social visibility. Additionally, the strategic use of flexible multilingual practices, including code-switching and translanguaging, can enable speakers to navigate complex social boundaries while preserving linguistic identity. Promoting marginalized languages requires holistic strategies integrating social networks, identity, equitable resources, and community-driven initiatives. Sustainability is a shared societal responsibility essential for safeguarding cultural heritage and linguistic diversity.

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