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Translation and the revitalization of the Yoruba language: cultural preservation and digital sustainability in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous language decline has become a major concern in multilingual societies where global languages dominate formal communication. In Nigeria, Yoruba, despite its rich literary tradition and large speaker population, faces pressure from globalization, urbanization, language shift, and the growing preference for English among younger generations. This study examines the role of translation in revitalizing the Yoruba language, focusing on cultural preservation and digital sustainability. Using a qualitative documentary research design anchored on Language Maintenance and Revitalization Theory, data were purposively drawn from translated literary texts, educational and religious publications, policy documents, digital language resources, online platforms, and scholarly works published between 2018 and 2025. The data were analysed thematically. Findings show that translation supports Yoruba revitalization by preserving oral traditions, proverbs, folktales, indigenous knowledge, and cultural expressions central to Yoruba identity. The study also reveals that artificial intelligence, machine translation, language corpora, online dictionaries, mobile learning applications, and social media expand opportunities for documenting, learning, and using Yoruba in digital spaces. Educational and religious translations further strengthen mother-tongue literacy, intergenerational transmission, and the language's functional domains. However, weak language policy implementation, limited funding, inadequate technological infrastructure, shortage of trained translators, and English dominance continue to constrain revitalization efforts. The study concludes that translation is a strategic tool for cultural continuity, educational development, and digital inclusion.

Keywords: Translation; Yoruba language; language revitalization; cultural preservation; digital sustainability; artificial intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Language is far more than a means of communication; it embodies the history, worldview, identity, and collective memory of a people. Through language, societies preserve and transmit indigenous knowledge, cultural values, oral traditions, folktales, proverbs, songs, religious beliefs, and philosophical ideas from one generation to another. Consequently, the vitality of an indigenous language is inseparable from the survival of the cultural heritage of its speakers. In recent years, however, globalization, urbanization, migration, technological advancement, and the growing dominance of international languages have significantly altered patterns of language use across the world. These developments have contributed to the declining use of many indigenous languages, prompting linguists, translators, educators, and policymakers to advocate renewed efforts toward language preservation and revitalization. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that linguistic diversity is fundamental to sustainable development, social inclusion, cultural resilience, and digital equity (UNESCO, 2003).

The growing concern over language endangerment is particularly evident in Africa, where multilingualism represents both a cultural resource and a developmental challenge. Although the continent is home to more than 2,000 languages, many indigenous languages continue to

lose functional relevance in education, governance, science, commerce, and digital communication. The widespread dominance of English, French, and Portuguese has reduced opportunities for indigenous languages to develop in formal and technological domains. UNESCO (2023) observes that languages excluded from educational systems and digital technologies become increasingly vulnerable because younger generations naturally gravitate towards languages that provide broader educational, economic, and technological opportunities. Similarly, recent studies on the digital readiness of Nigerian indigenous languages indicate that inadequate online resources, limited digital infrastructure, and insufficient language technologies continue to constrain the visibility and competitiveness of indigenous languages in contemporary digital environments (Oyewusi, 2024).

Among Nigeria's indigenous languages, Yoruba occupies a unique position because of its historical significance, rich literary tradition, and extensive speaker population across southwestern Nigeria and the African diaspora. The language remains central to the preservation of Yoruba cultural identity through its oral literature, òríkì (praise poetry), òwe (proverbs), traditional songs, religious expressions, festivals, indigenous medicine, and philosophical thought. These cultural resources continue to shape literature, music, theatre, religion, and social interaction within and beyond Nigeria. Despite this rich heritage, scholars increasingly report a gradual decline in the use of Yoruba among younger generations, particularly in urban centres where English dominates education, business, governance, and digital communication (Orife et al., 2020). This decline has generated considerable concern because language loss inevitably threatens the transmission of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity.

Recent Nigerian scholarship further indicates that many parents deliberately encourage English as the primary language of communication at home because of its perceived educational, professional, and socio-economic advantages. While such decisions may improve children's access to global opportunities, they also reduce exposure to Yoruba during the formative years of language acquisition. Consequently, many young people demonstrate limited competence in reading, writing, and speaking Yoruba with confidence, thereby weakening intergenerational language transmission and reducing the language's functional relevance in contemporary society (Ezeani, Rayson, Onyenwe, Uchechukwu, & Hepple 2020). These observations reinforce Tsykarev et al., (2025) position that the sustainability of indigenous languages depends on strengthening both community-based language transmission and institutional support through education, public policy, and digital innovation.

The emergence of digital technologies has introduced a new dimension to contemporary language revitalization. Communication now occurs increasingly through smartphones, social media, online learning platforms, artificial intelligence, digital publishing, speech technologies, and machine translation systems. While these innovations have expanded access to information and facilitated multilingual communication, they have simultaneously exposed significant disparities between well-resourced global languages and under-resourced indigenous languages. Languages that possess extensive digital corpora, machine translation systems, speech recognition technologies, online dictionaries, and educational applications continue to expand their global influence, whereas many African languages remain underrepresented within these technological ecosystems (UNESCO, 2003).

For the Yoruba language, this digital transformation presents both significant challenges and promising opportunities. On one hand, the shortage of computational resources, annotated corpora, language datasets, and artificial intelligence applications limits the language's participation in emerging technologies. On the other hand, recent advances in natural language processing, multilingual artificial intelligence, speech translation, and digital

localization have created unprecedented opportunities for strengthening the visibility and usability of Yoruba within contemporary communication systems. Studies by (Ezeani et al., 2020; Inuwa-Dutse, 2025; Orife et al., 2020) demonstrate that machine translation, speech technologies, digital corpora, educational applications, and language localization initiatives are gradually expanding the digital presence of Yoruba. These developments suggest that language revitalization in the twenty-first century extends beyond preserving literary texts to ensuring that indigenous languages participate actively in artificial intelligence, digital education, online media, e-governance, and the broader global knowledge economy.

Contrary to his backdrop, translation has assumed a more strategic role in contemporary efforts to revitalize indigenous languages. Rather than functioning merely as a linguistic exercise, translation has become an important mechanism for preserving cultural knowledge, facilitating intercultural communication, and expanding the functional domains of indigenous languages. Contemporary scholars argue that translation enables indigenous languages to participate in education, governance, healthcare, religion, literature, science, and digital communication, thereby strengthening their relevance in modern society (Baker, 2018). In multilingual nations such as Nigeria, translation also bridges the gap between local knowledge systems and global information networks by making culturally significant texts accessible to diverse audiences while preserving indigenous perspectives.

Also, for the Yoruba language, translation has contributed significantly to the preservation of cultural heritage through the documentation and dissemination of oral literature, folktales, òríkì (praise poetry), òwe (proverbs), historical narratives, traditional medicine, and indigenous philosophies. The translation of educational materials into Yoruba has equally enhanced mother-tongue literacy and promoted more effective learning during the early years of schooling (Tsykarev et al., 2025) maintains that children learn more effectively when literacy and foundational education begin in their first language, while recent Nigerian studies emphasize that the availability of translated instructional materials improves learners' linguistic competence and strengthens their attachment to indigenous cultural values (Oyewusi, 2024). These findings suggest that translation contributes not only to language preservation but also to educational development and cultural continuity.

Religious translation has likewise played an important role in sustaining the vitality of Yoruba. The translation of biblical texts, hymnbooks, liturgical materials, and devotional literature has enabled the language to remain vibrant within religious worship and community life. Beyond religious institutions, translated public health campaigns, electoral information, agricultural extension materials, and civic education resources have broadened the practical relevance of Yoruba in everyday communication. Consequently, translation has continued to expand the communicative functions of the language while reinforcing its cultural prestige within contemporary Nigerian society (Oyewusi, 2024).

The digital revolution has further transformed the possibilities for indigenous language revitalization. Artificial intelligence, machine translation, speech recognition, online dictionaries, digital archives, educational applications, podcasts, social media platforms, and video-sharing websites now provide unprecedented opportunities for creating, preserving, and disseminating Yoruba-language content. Recent advances in multilingual language technologies indicate that low-resource African languages are increasingly being incorporated into artificial intelligence systems through collaborative efforts involving linguists, translators, software developers, and research institutions (Ezeani et al., 2020; Inuwa-Dutse, 2025). Similarly, studies on digital localization demonstrate that incorporating Yoruba into digital products, online entertainment, educational software, and interactive media enhances language visibility while encouraging greater engagement among younger users (Jimoh et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2003) further emphasizes that indigenous languages must become active

participants in digital ecosystems if they are to remain relevant in the knowledge societies of the future.

Regardless of these encouraging developments, significant obstacles continue to impede the revitalization of the Yoruba language. Inadequate implementation of indigenous language policies, insufficient funding for language development programmes, a shortage of professionally trained translators, limited digital corpora, weak technological infrastructure, and the overwhelming dominance of English across formal domains continue to restrict the growth of Yoruba. In addition, prevailing societal attitudes often associate English with educational achievement, economic advancement, and social prestige, leading many families to prioritize English at the expense of indigenous language acquisition (Inuwa-Dutse, (2025). These challenges indicate that successful language revitalization requires more than cultural advocacy; it demands coordinated efforts involving government agencies, educational institutions, technology companies, community organizations, translators, and language practitioners.

Although previous studies have examined indigenous language preservation, mother-tongue education, translation, and digital technologies, much of the existing scholarship has considered these themes independently. Comparatively few studies have explored how translation simultaneously promotes the revitalization of the Yoruba language through cultural preservation and digital sustainability within the Nigerian context. This gap is particularly important at a time when digital communication and artificial intelligence are redefining the ways languages are learned, used, and preserved.

It is against this background that the present study investigates translation and the revitalization of the Yoruba language: cultural preservation and digital sustainability in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examines how literary, educational, religious, and digital translation practices contribute to preserving Yoruba cultural heritage, strengthening intergenerational language transmission, and enhancing the language's participation in contemporary digital environments. The study also identifies the institutional, technological, and sociolinguistic challenges affecting these efforts and proposes strategies for improving the long-term sustainability of the Yoruba language. By integrating perspectives from Translation Studies, Sociolinguistics, Digital Humanities, and indigenous language policy, the study contributes to current debates on language revitalization and provides practical insights for educators, translators, policymakers, technology developers, and cultural organisations committed to safeguarding Nigeria's linguistic and cultural heritage.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative documentary research design to examine the role of translation in the revitalization of the Yoruba language, with a particular emphasis on cultural preservation and digital sustainability in Nigeria. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the study sought to generate an in-depth understanding of how translation contributes to the maintenance and development of Yoruba across literary, educational, religious, and digital domains. Unlike quantitative methods that emphasize numerical measurement, documentary research allows for the systematic interpretation of existing texts, records, and digital resources relevant to the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

To ensure the relevance, reliability, and depth of the data collected, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established for the selection of documentary sources. The inclusion criteria required that all selected materials explicitly address translation, Yoruba language

development, cultural preservation, digital sustainability, or artificial intelligence applications. Furthermore, to capture contemporary scholarly discourse and technological advancements, sources were strictly restricted to those published between 2020 and 2026. Conversely, the exclusion criteria filtered out materials published outside this timeframe, documents lacking verifiable scholarly or institutional credibility, and publications that focused exclusively on languages other than Yoruba or failed to connect linguistic themes with translation and digital technologies.

Applying these criteria, data were purposively drawn from a wide range of credible documentary sources. These included translated Yoruba literary texts, folktales, proverbs, educational materials, religious publications, government policy documents, online dictionaries, language-learning mobile applications, social media educational platforms, artificial intelligence translation resources, and scholarly journal articles. Reports from international organizations, particularly UNESCO, together with publications on indigenous language revitalization and digital sustainability, also constituted important sources of data. The purposive sampling technique was adopted because it enabled the targeted selection of materials that strictly met the inclusion standards and aligned directly with the research objectives.

The collected documents were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Relevant information was carefully read, coded, categorized, and organized into recurring themes, including cultural preservation, educational translation, digital sustainability, artificial intelligence, language policy, and challenges to Yoruba language revitalization. These themes were subsequently interpreted within the framework of Fishman's Language Maintenance and Revitalization Theory, which provided the analytical lens for explaining the relationship between translation and sustainable language development.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, documentary evidence was triangulated across multiple scholarly and institutional sources. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, recognized digital language platforms, official policy documents, and publications from reputable organizations that satisfied the inclusion parameters. Ethical standards relating to academic integrity were strictly observed through accurate citation, acknowledgment of intellectual property, and faithful representation of the views expressed in all consulted materials. This rigorous methodological approach and transparent selection framework provided a reliable basis for examining how translation contributes to the cultural preservation and digital sustainability of the Yoruba language in contemporary Nigeria.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The documentary materials analysed in this study comprised translated Yoruba literary texts, educational and religious publications, policy documents, digital language resources, and recent studies on artificial intelligence and language technology published between 2018 and 2025. The thematic analysis identified five major themes that explain how translation contributes to the revitalization of the Yoruba language in contemporary Nigeria.

Translation and Cultural Preservation

The analysis indicates that translation remains an important medium for preserving the cultural heritage of the Yoruba people. Documentary evidence shows that translated proverbs, folktales, praise poetry (oríkì), and oral narratives continue to transmit indigenous philosophies, moral values, and communal experiences across generations. For example, the

proverb "Ìwà l'ẹwà" (Good character is beauty) reflects the Yoruba belief that moral integrity is the foundation of human dignity, while "Òwe lẹ́ẹ̀sin ọ̀rọ̀; bí ọ̀rọ̀ bá sọnù, òwe la fi ń wá a" (A proverb is the horse of speech; when speech is lost, a proverb helps to recover it) underscores the central role of proverbs in effective communication.

Translation in Education and Religion

The analysis further reveals that translation has expanded the use of Yoruba in educational and religious settings. Translated textbooks, literacy materials, Bible versions, hymn books, and devotional literature have strengthened mother-tongue learning while promoting literacy and cultural identity. Expressions such as "Ilẹ̀ ayé ń yí ká Oòrùn" (The Earth revolves around the Sun) demonstrate that Yoruba can effectively communicate scientific concepts, whereas "Máa fẹ́ ọmọ nìkejì rẹ bí ara rẹ" (Love your neighbour as yourself) illustrates the role of translation in religious instruction.

Translation and Digital Sustainability

Another important finding is the increasing contribution of translation to the digital development of the Yoruba language. The localisation of software interfaces, online learning platforms, mobile applications, and digital communication tools has enhanced the language's visibility within contemporary technological environments. Common digital expressions such as "Wọlé" (Log in), "Ọ̀rọ̀ aṣínà" (Password), and "Ṣàgbékalẹ̀" (Upload) illustrate how translation enables Yoruba speakers to navigate digital platforms using their indigenous language. The analysis further indicates that artificial intelligence, machine translation, and language corpora are expanding opportunities for multilingual communication. Artificial intelligence technologies significantly enhance the digital sustainability and revitalization of the Yoruba language by bridging resource gaps. Natural language processing (NLP) tools and machine translation systems enable the automated processing and translation of Yoruba text, expanding its visibility across online platforms and digital environments. Advancing digital platforms and speech recognition technologies allows AI systems to process spoken Yoruba, supporting mobile apps and interactive media (Obikeze et al., 2022). These computational tools facilitate transitions into modern digital education and governance (Obi et al., 2026). However, because AI struggles with indigenous proverbs and tonal nuances, human expertise remains vital (Iwuno, 2021). Furthermore, optimizing these technologies requires structured institutional frameworks and targeted technical skill development (Chukwurah et al., 2020).

Translation and Indigenous Knowledge Preservation

Documentary evidence also shows that translation contributes significantly to preserving indigenous knowledge systems. Traditional medicine, agriculture, environmental practices, conflict resolution, and oral history are increasingly being documented through translated literary and digital materials. For instance, "Ewé ewúro ń jẹ́ kí ara balẹ̀" (Bitter leaf is used for medicinal purposes) reflects indigenous medical knowledge, while "Agbẹ ni baba orílẹ̀-èdè" (The farmer is the backbone of the nation) highlights the cultural importance of agriculture.

Challenges to Yoruba Language Revitalization

Despite these positive contributions, the analysis identifies several challenges that continue to hinder the revitalization of the Yoruba language. These include inadequate implementation of language policies, limited funding, shortage of trained translators, insufficient digital linguistic resources, and the continued dominance of English in education, governance, and digital communication. These constraints reduce opportunities for younger generations to

acquire and use Yoruba in everyday life. Nevertheless, the overall findings demonstrate that translation remains a practical strategy for strengthening cultural continuity, expanding educational opportunities, preserving indigenous knowledge, and enhancing the digital sustainability of the Yoruba language.

The evidence presented in this study highlights the increasingly strategic role of translation in the revitalization of the Yoruba language. Rather than functioning solely as a means of transferring meaning between languages, translation has become an important mechanism for preserving cultural identity, expanding communicative domains, and facilitating the integration of Yoruba into contemporary educational and technological spaces. This broader role reflects the changing realities of multilingual societies, where language survival depends not only on the number of speakers but also on the ability of a language to remain relevant across diverse spheres of social life.

A prominent pattern emerging from the analysis is the contribution of translation to the preservation of Yoruba cultural heritage. The translation of proverbs, folktales, praise poetry (oríkì), and oral narratives has ensured that indigenous philosophies and traditional knowledge remain accessible to both native and non-native speakers. This observation lends support to (Baker, 2018; Fang & Baker, 2025), who maintains that translation serves as a cultural bridge through which communities preserve and transmit their collective identity. It also echoesAbrams & Strogat (2003), Crystal, (2000) argument that the erosion of indigenous languages often results in the irreversible loss of valuable cultural knowledge. Nevertheless, (Venuti, 2017) cautions that translators must avoid excessive domestication, as simplifying culturally specific expressions for target readers may weaken the uniqueness of the source culture. The implication is that successful translation should strike a careful balance between accessibility and cultural fidelity.

Beyond its cultural significance, translation has substantially expanded the functional use of Yoruba in education, religion, and public communication. The availability of translated textbooks, literacy materials, biblical texts, and other educational resources demonstrates that Yoruba continues to evolve as a language capable of expressing both traditional and contemporary knowledge. This finding reinforces Fishman's (1991) proposition that language maintenance depends on sustained use across key social institutions. At the same time, Bamgbose (2011), Trask (2013) reminds us that institutional support alone cannot reverse language shift where speakers continue to associate indigenous languages with limited socioeconomic opportunities. This perspective suggests that translation initiatives must be complemented by policies that improve the prestige and everyday use of Yoruba within families, schools, and public institutions.

The study also points to the growing influence of digital technologies in contemporary language revitalization. The emergence of machine translation, language corpora, mobile applications, speech technologies, and other artificial intelligence tools has created new opportunities for the documentation and wider use of Yoruba. These developments are consistent with the observations of (Ezeani et al., 2020; Orife et al., 2020) who emphasise the importance of computational linguistic resources in strengthening African languages within digital environments. More recent studies by (Abioye & Ge, 2025; Akpobi, 2025) further demonstrate that advances in natural language processing and bilingual translation technologies are improving the digital representation of Yoruba. Even so, these scholars acknowledge that inadequate funding, limited digital corpora, and weak collaboration among researchers, translators, and technology developers continue to constrain the full potential of indigenous language technologies.

When consider together, indigenous languages are more likely to survive when they remain active across multiple domains of communication. However, the present study extends

this perspective by demonstrating that meaningful participation in artificial intelligence, digital communication, and emerging language technologies has become equally important for sustainable language revitalisation. Translation therefore provides the critical link between cultural continuity and technological innovation, positioning the Yoruba language to thrive within both its traditional cultural setting and the rapidly evolving digital world.

This study effectively connects Joshua Fishman's Reversing Language Shift (RLS) Theory with empirical findings regarding the revitalization of the Yoruba language through translation. Fishman's foundational framework posits that a language remains viable only when it is actively transmitted across generations and utilized across key social institutions, such as education, religion, and public administration (Fishman, 1991; Austin & Sallabank, 2014). The study's results corroborate this premise, showing that the translation of educational textbooks, religious scripts, and literacy materials successfully expands the functional domains of Yoruba within modern societal structures.

Nevertheless, classical RLS theory has been critiqued for its primary focus on local communities and its limited accounting for the rapid evolution of digital technologies in contemporary language maintenance (Edunov, 2022; Grenoble & Whaley, 2005). The findings of this study directly bridge this theoretical gap. While intergenerational and community-based transmission remain foundational, the analysis demonstrates that modern language survival is equally dependent on active digital representation. The emergence of machine translation, natural language processing tools, and mobile applications provides vital new channels for Yoruba documentation, computational integration, and everyday usage (Ezeani et al., 2020; Orife et al., 2020; Abioye & Ge, 2025).

Consequently, this research extends Fishman's framework by explicitly incorporating digital sustainability as a core dimension of language revitalization. Translating indigenous folklore, proverbs, and poetry preserves cultural heritage and collective identity (Baker, 2018; Fang & Baker, 2025), while digital integration ensures the language remains relevant to tech-savvy younger generations. Ultimately, translation functions as the critical mechanism linking traditional cultural continuity with technological innovation, securing the long-term vitality of Yoruba.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the contribution of translation to the revitalization of the Yoruba language, with particular emphasis on cultural preservation and digital sustainability in Nigeria. The evidence demonstrates that translation has evolved beyond its conventional role as a linguistic activity to become an important instrument for preserving indigenous cultural heritage, expanding the functional domains of Yoruba, and supporting its continued relevance in a rapidly changing technological environment.

The analysis shows that translated literary works, educational resources, religious publications, and digital content have strengthened the preservation of Yoruba oral traditions, proverbs, indigenous knowledge, and cultural values while making them accessible to wider audiences. Equally important is the increasing integration of Yoruba into artificial intelligence, machine translation, language corpora, mobile applications, and other digital platforms, which has created new opportunities for language learning, documentation, and multilingual communication. These developments indicate that technological innovation, when supported by effective translation, can significantly enhance the vitality of indigenous languages.

At the same time, the study highlights persistent challenges that continue to undermine revitalization efforts, including weak implementation of language policies, inadequate

funding, and shortage of professionally trained translators, limited technological infrastructure, and the continued dominance of English across many formal domains. These constraints suggest that translation alone cannot guarantee sustainable language maintenance without supportive institutional policies and active community participation.

As a whole, the findings demonstrate that the future of the Yoruba language depends on a balanced integration of cultural preservation and technological advancement. Sustained collaboration among governments, educational institutions, translators, technology developers, cultural organisations, and Yoruba-speaking communities will be essential for ensuring that the language remains both culturally vibrant and digitally relevant. In this regard, translation provides a practical pathway through which the Yoruba language can continue to flourish within an increasingly multilingual and technology-driven world.

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