



DIGITALISATION, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A FOCUS ON NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language is a fundamental marker of identity, shaping cultural heritage, religious practices and societal interactions. North Central Nigeria is home to diverse linguistic groups whose languages influence cultural traditions and religious beliefs. In the digital age, technological advancements have reshaped communication patterns, impacting indigenous languages and their roles in identity formation. The rapid advancement of digital technologies has indeed transformed language use and identity formation worldwide, including in North Central Nigeria. This paper examines the intersection of digitalization, language, and identity in the region, highlighting how digital tools, social media, and online platforms influence linguistic expression and cultural identity. Utilizing qualitative and quantitative data, the study analytically investigates how digitalization is shaping language preservation, modification, and hybridization among indigenous communities. The study as well explores the linguistic diversity of North Central Nigeria as it examines the interplay between language, culture, and religion in the context of digitalization. In this direction, the study highlights the challenges and opportunities digital platforms present for indigenous language preservation and proposes strategies for sustaining linguistic heritage in the modern era. Thus, a comprehensive literature review on digitalization is included, focusing on recent studies. The findings contribute to understanding the implications of digitalization on linguistic identity in the region and suggest ways to leverage technology. The study concludes that technological advancements is gradually reshaping identity patterns in the North central Nigeria via its impact on indigenous languages that serve as the vehicle of these indigenous identities.

Keywords: Language, Identity, Digital age, North Central Nigeria, Indigenous languages, Culture, Religion

Introduction

Language is deeply intertwined with identity. This is as language acts as a vessel for identity expression, cultural expression, religious practices, and social cohesion. In the North Central Nigeria, a region characterized by significant linguistic diversity, language plays a crucial role in shaping cultural and religious identities. The advent of digital communication has however transformed how languages are used, learned, and preserved in this region.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on sociolinguistic and digital communication theories to analyse the relationship between digitalization, language and identity. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956) suggests that language shapes perception and worldview, underscoring its importance in cultural and religious identity formation. Additionally,



Castells' (2009) theory of the network society provides insights into how digital technologies influence linguistic diversity and identity in contemporary societies.

Linguistic Diversity in the North Central Nigeria

North Central Nigeria is home to diverse linguistic groups. Each of these groups plays a crucial role in shaping the region's cultural traditions and religious beliefs. The advent of the digital age has however, introduced new dimensions to language use and identity formation. Technological advancements have reshaped communication patterns, altering the status, perception and influence of indigenous languages.

North Central Nigeria comprises Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau States, and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). The region is characterized by immense linguistic diversity, with numerous indigenous languages spoken across its states.

The Benue linguistic identities in the North Central Nigeria

Benue is predominantly inhabited by the Idoma, Tiv and Igede ethnic groups, each with a distinct language. Tiv, the most widely spoken language, serves as a medium for cultural expression and community bonding. The Idoma and Igede languages also play significant roles in preserving the cultural identity of their speakers.

Tiv Language: Tiv language is the most widely spoken in Benue State, with millions of speakers. It belongs to the Southern Bantoid branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Tiv is more than a communication tool; it serves as a medium for cultural expression, folklore, and community bonding. Tiv proverbs, music and oral traditions are integral to the identity of the Tiv people. The language has however adapted to modern influences, with an increasing presence of digital contents and social media platforms.

Idoma Language: The Idoma people, the second-largest ethnic group in Benue, speak the Idoma language, which belongs to the Idomoid branch of the Niger-Congo family. Speakers. Idoma is deeply rooted in oral traditions, with storytelling, poetry, and music being essential components of cultural heritage. The language plays a crucial role in traditional leadership structures and religious ceremonies. Despite external influences, Idoma continues to thrive through local media broadcasts and digital advocacy.

Igede Language: The Igede people, though smaller in population, have a vibrant linguistic and cultural identity. The Igede language, classified under the Volta-Niger branch of the Niger-Congo family, is spoken in Benue and parts of Cross River State. Like Tiv and Idoma, Igede is rich in folklore, proverbs, and traditional songs that reinforce community values. Efforts are being made to preserve the language through education and digital literacy campaigns.



Kogi linguistic identities in the North Central Nigeria

Kogi State is a melting pot of ethnicities, with the Igala, Ebira, and Okun Yoruba being the dominant linguistic groups. Igala is the most widely spoken language, followed by Ebira and Okun Yoruba. These languages not only serve as communication tools but also encapsulate the rich history and traditions of the people.

Igala Language: Igala is the most widely spoken language in Kogi State, with its speakers mainly concentrated in the eastern part of the state. It belongs to the Yoruboid branch of the Niger-Congo language family and shares similarities with Yoruba. Igala has a rich oral tradition, with folk tales, proverbs, and songs that reflect the people's history and cultural values. The Attah of Igala, the paramount ruler, plays a significant role in preserving the language and traditions. In modern times, efforts to document and promote the Igala language through literature, digital media, and radio broadcasts have gained momentum.

Ebira Language: The Ebira language is primarily spoken in the central part of Kogi State, particularly in Okene and its surrounding areas. Ebira belongs to the Nupoid subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family. The language is deeply connected to Ebira traditional music and masquerade performances, which are crucial aspects of cultural festivals. Although English and Pidgin English are increasingly used among the younger generation, Ebira remains a key marker of identity and community belonging. There have been initiatives to incorporate Ebira into formal education and digital content to prevent language erosion.

Okun Yoruba Language. The Okun people, located in the western part of Kogi State, speak a dialect of Yoruba that has distinct phonological and lexical features influenced by neighbouring ethnic groups. Okun Yoruba plays a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Okun people, with traditional rites, naming ceremonies, and festivals being conducted in the language. Okun communities have embraced digital tools such as social media and YouTube to promote their language and share cultural knowledge.

Kwara linguistic identities in the North Central Nigeria

Kwara State is linguistically diverse, with Yoruba being the predominant language, particularly in the western and central parts of the state. Other notable languages include Baruba, Nupe, and Fulfulde. The Yoruba dialect spoken in Kwara has unique variations influenced by interactions with neighboring ethnic groups.

Yoruba Language: Yoruba is the most widely spoken language in Kwara State, especially in Ilorin and its surrounding areas. The Yoruba spoken in Kwara has unique variations due to influences from Hausa, Nupe, and Fulani interactions. Yoruba in Kwara maintains strong oral traditions, including poetry, folklore, and religious chants. It is widely used in traditional governance and religious practices, especially in Islamic and indigenous faith systems.



Baruba Language: The Baruba people, primarily found in the northern part of Kwara State near the border with Benin Republic, speak the Baruba (Baatonu) language. Baruba is a Gur language that has retained much of its linguistic heritage despite influences from neighbouring Yoruba and Hausa speakers. It is mainly used in traditional ceremonies and local governance structures.

Nupe Language: The Nupe people of Kwara State, found in areas like Patigi and Lafiagi, speak the Nupe language, which belongs to the Nupoid branch of the Niger-Congo family. Nupe has a long history of cultural expression through poetry, music, and oral storytelling. It has been historically significant in trade and Islamic scholarship, with many Nupe texts written in Arabic scripts.

Fulfulde Language: Fulfulde, the language of the Fulani people, is spoken in different parts of Kwara, particularly by pastoralist communities. The Fulani people have played a role in the historical spread of Islam in the region, and their language reflects their nomadic and cultural traditions.

Nasarawa linguistic identities in the North Central Nigeria

Nasarawa State is home to a significant number of indigenous languages, including Eggon, Gwandara, Alago, and Mada. These languages are intrinsic to the cultural and historical identities of the various ethnic groups in the state.

Eggon Language: Eggon is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nasarawa, with a language rich in oral traditions, folklore and proverbs. It serves as a medium for cultural transmission and traditional governance.

Gwandara Language: Gwandara, a language related to Hausa, has distinct phonetic and lexical features. It is spoken mainly in the western part of the state and reflects the cultural heritage of the Gwandara people.

Alago Language: The Alago people, known for their strong cultural identity, use the Alago language in ceremonies, traditional leadership, and historical documentation.

Mada Language: Mada, spoken in central Nasarawa, plays a critical role in cultural preservation, with local festivals and rituals conducted with the language.

Niger State exhibits a wide linguistic spectrum, with Nupe, Gwari, Hausa, and Kambari being some of the predominant languages. Nupe has historical significance as a language of trade and governance, while Gwari and Kambari retain strong cultural ties to the indigenous communities.

Niger linguistic identities in the North Central Nigeria

Nupe Language: Nupe is one of the most historically significant languages in Niger State, spoken primarily in Bida, Lapai, and Agaie. It has served as a language of trade,



governance, and Islamic scholarship. Nupe culture is rich in poetry, praise songs, and proverbs, many of which have been passed down through oral tradition and more recently through digital platforms.

Gwari Language: Gwari (Gbagini) is spoken by a large indigenous population in Niger State. It is known for its unique tonal system and rich cultural expressions, including traditional music, dance, and rituals.

Hausa Language: Hausa is widely spoken in Niger State due to its role as a lingua franca in Northern Nigeria. It facilitates communication among diverse ethnic groups and is commonly used in trade and administration.

Kambari Language: The Kambari people, found mainly in the northwestern part of Niger State, have a language with deep-rooted cultural significance. Despite external influences, Kambari remains a crucial aspect of identity and traditional practices.

Plateau linguistic identities in the North Central Nigeria

Plateau State is one of the most linguistically diverse states in Nigeria, hosting languages such as Berom, Tarok, Ngas, Mwaghavul, and Goemai. These languages play a critical role in local governance, social cohesion, and cultural transmission.

Berom Language: The Berom people, the largest ethnic group in Plateau State, speak Berom, a Plateau language known for its rich oral traditions, including folklore, proverbs, and songs that convey historical narratives and moral lessons.

Tarok Language: The Tarok people primarily inhabit Langtang and speak the Tarok language, which is a key part of their cultural identity, expressed through storytelling and traditional rituals.

Ngas Language: Spoken by the Ngas people in Pankshin and Kanke, Ngas has a strong presence in local governance, traditional ceremonies, and religious practices.

Mwaghavul Language: Mwaghavul is spoken mainly in Mangu and serves as a crucial element of community life and social interactions.

Goemai Language: The Goemai people of Shendam use their language in traditional leadership and communal decision-making processes.

Abuja (FCT) linguistic identities in the North Central Nigeria

Abuja, as Nigeria's capital, accommodates speakers from across the country. However, Gwari (Gbagini) is the dominant indigenous language spoken in the area. Despite the influx of non-indigenous languages, Gwari retains its significance as a marker of identity for the native people.



Gwari (Gbagyi) Language: The Gwari people, who are the original inhabitants of Abuja and its surrounding areas, speak the Gwari (or Gbagyi) language, classified under the Nupoid branch of the Niger-Congo family. Gwari is not only a means of communication but also a key aspect of cultural identity. The language is used in traditional festivals, folklore, and local governance. Despite the influx of other Nigerian languages and English due to Abuja's cosmopolitan nature, Gwari remains vital for indigenous identity. The Gwari people have made efforts to preserve their language through cultural heritage initiatives, digital documentation, and community-driven education programs.

The Impact of Digitalisation on Language and Identity in the North Central Nigeria

The rise of digital platforms, social media, and mobile technologies has significantly influenced language use in North Central Nigeria.

Language Shift and Endangerment: With increasing reliance on English and Pidgin for online communication, indigenous languages face the risk of reduced usage, particularly among younger generations. Social media platforms favour languages with global reach, leading to the marginalization of local dialects.

Digital Preservation of Indigenous Languages: Despite challenges, digital tools offer opportunities for language documentation and preservation. Initiatives such as online dictionaries, language-learning apps, and digitized folklore archives contribute to the sustainability of indigenous languages.

Identity Formation in the Digital Space: Social media and digital storytelling platforms allow ethnic groups to showcase their linguistic and cultural heritage. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook have become avenues for language advocacy, reinforcing cultural pride among speakers of indigenous languages.

The intersection of digitalisation, language, and identity in North Central Nigeria reflects a dynamic shift in linguistic practices and cultural expressions. While digital technologies pose threats to indigenous languages, they also offer tools for language revitalization and identity reinforcement. Efforts must then be made to promote the inclusion of indigenous languages in digital spaces to ensure their continued relevance in the digital age.

North Central Nigeria is home to a vast array of indigenous languages, reflecting the region's ethnic and cultural richness. The major linguistic groups in the region include:

Tiv: Predominantly spoken in Benue State, Tiv is central to the cultural and religious identity of its people. Traditional storytelling, oral histories, and religious expressions are conveyed through the language (Blench, 2019).



Traditional Storytelling and Oral Histories: Tiv culture is deeply rooted in oral traditions, with folklore, proverbs, and epic narratives playing a crucial role in preserving history. Elders pass down knowledge through intricate storytelling, using the Tiv language to convey wisdom, morality, and communal values. These stories often feature heroic figures, supernatural elements, and lessons about resilience and cooperation.

Religious Expressions and Festivals: The Tiv people have a rich spiritual heritage that is expressed through their language. Traditional religious practices involve invocations, chants and songs in Tiv, which are essential during rites of passage, communal prayers, and festivals. Christianity has also found strong roots among the Tiv, with many churches incorporating Tiv hymns and sermons, thereby blending faith with cultural identity.

Music and Dance: The Tiv language is integral to traditional music and dance forms such as the Swange dance that is always an essential aspect of their celebrations. The rhythms, chants, and lyrics in Tiv music express emotions, celebrate achievements, and strengthen communal bonds. These performances are gaining digital traction, with artists producing songs in Tiv and sharing them on online platforms to promote the language and cultural heritage.

Proverbs and Wisdom Expressions: Tiv proverbs are an essential part of the language, encapsulating wisdom and life lessons. These proverbs are frequently used in conversations, dispute resolution, and public discourse. Digital spaces such as social media and blogs are increasingly being used to document and share Tiv proverbs, ensuring their survival for future generations.

Nupe: Spoken in Niger State, Nupe serves as a medium for cultural practices and Islamic teachings, as the Nupe people have a long history of Islamic influence (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2021).

Islamic Influence and Scholarship: The Nupe people embraced Islam as early as the 18th century, and the Nupe language has played a crucial role in propagating Islamic teachings. Arabic scripts have historically been used to write Nupe religious texts, and Islamic scholars from the region have contributed significantly to Quranic studies and Islamic jurisprudence. Today, many Islamic schools in Niger State teach religious knowledge in Nupe, reinforcing its role in spiritual identity.

Traditional Rites and Ceremonies: The Nupe language is central to traditional practices, including coronation ceremonies, marriage rites, and naming traditions. The EtsuNupe, the paramount ruler of the Nupe people, conducts traditional governance in Nupe, preserving the people's cultural and political identity.



Oral Literature and Proverbs: Nupe proverbs and oral literature are vital tools for education and moral instruction. Stories told in Nupe often carry deep philosophical meanings, reflecting themes of wisdom, bravery, and communal harmony. Elders use these stories to pass down knowledge to younger generations.

Music, Dance, and Artistic Expression: Nupe cultural festivals feature unique musical instruments like the Kakaki (a long trumpet) and drums that accompany traditional dances. Songs in Nupe language tell tales of heroism, social values, and religious devotion. The Nupe artistic tradition also includes intricate beadwork, pottery, and woven textiles, with many artisans expressing their creativity through the language.

Digital Preservation and Modern Usage: In recent years, there has been a growing movement to document and promote the Nupe language through digital platforms. Social media, YouTube, and online radio stations now feature Nupe content, ensuring that the language remains relevant to younger generations in an era of digital transformation.

Gwari (Gbagyil): Found in Niger, Kogi, and the Federal Capital Territory, Gwari speakers maintain strong traditional practices, including indigenous religious beliefs and cultural festivals.

Traditional Religious Beliefs: The Gwari people uphold ancestral worship and nature-based spirituality, expressed through prayers, rituals, and invocations in the Gwari language. Sacred groves and ancestral shrines remain significant spiritual sites.

Cultural Festivals: Gwari festivals such as the Zhibaje Festival celebrate agricultural cycles and communal unity, featuring traditional music, dance, and storytelling in Gwari.

Art and Crafts: Gwari artisans are known for pottery and beadwork, with designs carrying cultural significance. The Gwari language is used to pass down crafting techniques through generations.

Music and Dance: Gwari music, incorporating indigenous instruments, is essential in ceremonies and storytelling, reinforcing communal identity.

Digital Advocacy: Efforts to promote Gwari include online storytelling, social media content, and digital dictionaries, helping preserve the language in the modern era.

Idoma: Primarily spoken in Benue State, Idoma language and culture are deeply rooted in oral traditions, proverbs, and ancestral worship, which coexist with The Idoma people, the second-largest ethnic group in Benue, speak the Idoma language, which belongs to the Idomoid branch of the Niger-Congo family. Idoma is deeply rooted in oral traditions, with storytelling, poetry, and music being essential



components of cultural heritage. The language plays a crucial role in traditional leadership structures and religious ceremonies.

- Oral Traditions and Proverbs: The Idoma people are known for their rich oral traditions, including folktales, epic narratives, and poetic expressions. Proverbs in the Idoma language encapsulate deep wisdom and serve as essential tools in dispute resolution, moral education, and leadership. These oral traditions are gradually being documented in digital archives and local radio programs to ensure their preservation.
- Ancestral Worship and Spiritual Practices: Traditional Idoma religious beliefs involve a strong connection to ancestors, with rituals and ceremonies conducted in the native language. Libations, prayers, and invocations are performed in Idoma to honor ancestors, seek guidance, and maintain social harmony. These practices coexist with Christianity and Islam, as many Idoma people have embraced both faiths while retaining elements of their traditional spirituality.
- Festivals and Cultural Celebrations: The Alekwu Festival is a significant cultural event among the Idoma people, where ancestral spirits (Alekwu) are honoured through dance, music, and ritual performances in the Idoma language. The festival reflects the people's historical consciousness and spiritual identity.
- Music and Performance Arts: The Idoma language is prominently used in traditional music and theatrical performances. Drumming, chants, and praise singing are common during ceremonies and social gatherings. Modern Idoma artists are incorporating the language into contemporary Afrobeat and gospel music, using digital platforms to reach wider audiences.
- Modern Preservation Efforts: As digitalisation spreads, Idoma communities are increasingly using social media, YouTube, and digital publishing to promote and teach their language. Mobile applications and online dictionaries have been developed to aid language learning, ensuring that younger generations remain connected to their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Christianity and Islam.

Ebira: A major language in Kogi State, Ebira is integral to cultural festivals, traditional governance, and religious ceremonies.

Cultural Festivals and Music: The Ebira people are known for their vibrant festivals, such as the Eche-Ozi Festival, where traditional dances, songs, and drumming are performed in the Ebira language. These festivals serve as a means of reinforcing communal identity and celebrating historical achievements.

Traditional Governance and Leadership: The Ebira language plays a crucial role in traditional governance structures. Chieftaincy titles, decision-making processes, and conflict resolution are often conducted in Ebira, ensuring the continuity of indigenous administrative systems.



Religious Ceremonies and Beliefs: The Ebira people practice a mix of indigenous religion, Islam, and Christianity. Traditional religious ceremonies involve chants, incantations, and prayers in Ebira, highlighting its role in spiritual identity. Despite modernization, many Ebira communities still uphold traditional religious practices alongside contemporary faiths.

Oral Literature and Proverbs: Like many indigenous groups, the Ebira people have a strong tradition of oral literature. Folktales, myths, and proverbs in Ebira serve as tools for moral education and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Digital initiatives, such as online storytelling platforms and YouTube channels, are emerging to preserve and promote Ebira cultural expressions.

Igala: Also spoken in Kogi State, Igala language and culture are intertwined with indigenous religious practices and the influence of Christianity and Islam.

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Religious Significance: The Igala people have a long history of indigenous religious practices, including worship of ancestral spirits and deities such as Ọjò, the river goddess. Traditional rituals, prayers, and sacrifices are conducted in the Igala language. With the spread of Christianity and Islam, religious expressions have evolved, integrating elements of Igala culture with these global faiths.

Cultural Festivals: The Igala people celebrate several cultural festivals, such as the Ọchájá festival, which features traditional dances, music, and masquerades that preserve their rich heritage. These events are essential for passing down historical narratives and social values to younger generations.

Language Preservation Efforts: Efforts are being made to document and promote the Igala language through digital media, online dictionaries, and educational programs. Local radio stations broadcast in Igala, ensuring that it remains a relevant part of daily communication.

These languages serve as more than just communication tools; they encode historical knowledge, social norms, and religious traditions. However, the rise of English and Pidgin English, coupled with digital communication trends, has led to language shifts and the gradual erosion of indigenous linguistic identity.

Language, Culture, and Religion in North Central Nigeria

Language is a key medium through which cultural values and religious beliefs are transmitted across generations.



Cultural Identity and Indigenous Languages

Language preservation is crucial for maintaining cultural identity. Indigenous languages in North Central Nigeria are used in:

- **Folktales and Proverbs:** Oral traditions convey moral lessons and historical knowledge, reinforcing communal identity.
- **Music and Festivals:** Indigenous songs, dances, and festivals celebrate historical events and societal values. For example, the **Igala Ibo Festival** and **Ebira Ekuechi Festival** are conducted in native languages, emphasizing cultural pride.
- **Traditional Governance:** Many ethnic groups have unique linguistic expressions tied to their traditional leadership structures. Titles and rituals are performed in local languages to preserve authenticity.

Religious Practices and Linguistic Expression

Religion in North Central Nigeria is diverse, with Christianity, Islam, and indigenous beliefs coexisting. Language plays a vital role in religious identity:

Islam and Arabic Influence: Among the Nupe and parts of Kogi and Niger states, Islamic teachings are often delivered in Arabic, influencing linguistic practices. Nupe, for example, has adopted Arabic loanwords in religious discourse (Danladi, 2013).

Christianity and Bible Translation: The translation of the Bible into local languages such as Tiv and Idoma has strengthened indigenous religious identity. Indigenous-language church services help retain linguistic heritage among Christian communities (Bamgbose, 2011).

- **Traditional Religion:** Indigenous spiritual practices are heavily language-dependent. Rituals, divinations, and sacrifices are conducted in native tongues, emphasizing the connection between language and spiritual beliefs.

Digital Communication and Its Impact on Language, Culture, and Religion

The digital age has transformed linguistic landscapes, influencing how language is used in cultural and religious contexts.

Social Media and Indigenous Language Use

Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube provide spaces for cultural and religious expression. However, the dominance of English and Pidgin English in digital conversations has led to the reduced use of indigenous languages. Churches and mosques increasingly use digital media for outreach, often in dominant languages, sidelining local linguistic heritage.

Online Religious and Cultural Content

The availability of online religious texts, sermons, and traditional storytelling platforms in indigenous languages remains limited. While some digital initiatives promote indigenous languages (e.g., Bible apps in Tiv or Nupe), the overall



representation of North Central Nigerian languages online is minimal (Eberhard et al., 2021).

Digital Literacy and Language Shift

Younger generations are more inclined to use English and Pidgin English on digital platforms. The lack of digital literacy in indigenous languages hinders their usage online. The shift towards dominant languages in digital communication affects intergenerational language transmission.

Strategies for Sustaining Indigenous Languages in the Digital Age

To mitigate the impact of digitalization on language, culture, and religion, the following strategies are recommended:

1. **Digital Language Documentation:** Developing online archives for indigenous languages, including dictionaries, folklore, and religious texts.
2. **Local Content Creation:** Encouraging the production of digital media content—such as YouTube videos, podcasts, and social media posts—in indigenous languages.
3. **Religious and Cultural Digitalization:** Expanding the presence of indigenous languages in religious texts, online sermons, and cultural programs.
4. **Technology-Driven Language Learning:** Developing language-learning apps and digital tools for indigenous languages.
5. **Policy and Advocacy:** Governments and institutions should promote indigenous languages through digital inclusion programs and educational policies.
6. **Digitalization, Language, and Identity in the Digital Age**
7. **Digitalization and Language in North Central Nigeria**
8. The digital age has revolutionized communication, reshaping how languages are used and identities are formed. In North Central Nigeria, home to diverse ethnic groups and languages, digitalization presents both opportunities and challenges for language preservation and cultural expression. In North Central Nigeria, digitalization manifests in several ways:

Social Media and Indigenous Language Use: Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and TikTok have become spaces where indigenous languages, such as Hausa, Tiv, Nupe, and Idoma, are written, spoken, and shared.

Language Hybridization: The blending of indigenous languages with English and Pidgin in digital communication creates new linguistic patterns.

Online Learning and Language Preservation: Digital platforms are utilized for language teaching and documentation, preserving endangered languages through mobile apps, YouTube channels, and websites.



Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Language Processing: AI-driven applications like Google Translate and speech-to-text tools now include African languages, improving access to digital content in local languages.

Data on Digitalization in North Central Nigeria

To understand the impact of digitalization on language and identity, data were collected from online platforms, surveys, and existing reports.

Internet and Smartphone Penetration

According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), internet penetration in Nigeria has risen significantly with a growing number of users in North Central states such as Plateau, Benue, Niger, and Kogi. The availability of affordable smartphones has increased access to digital platforms, where indigenous languages are frequently used.

Social Media Usage Trends

A survey conducted by Ugwu (2024) among 500 respondents across North Central Nigeria revealed:

- 65% of respondents use social media daily.
- 40% frequently use indigenous languages in digital communication.
- 55% believe social media is helping to preserve their linguistic identity.
- 30% reported mixing English with their native language in digital interactions.

These statistics highlight how digital platforms serve as both spaces for linguistic preservation and mediums for language hybridization.

Several studies have examined the relationship between digitalization, language, and identity.

Crystal (2019) argues that digital communication has accelerated language change, with social media influencing vocabulary, grammar, and writing styles.

Daniels (2021) explores the role of mobile technology in language documentation, showing how digital tools help preserve endangered languages.

Ogunyemi and Yusuf (2023) focus on African linguistic diversity online, highlighting how digital spaces can both empower and marginalize indigenous languages.

Eisenstein (2020) discusses digital dialectology, explaining how online linguistic variations reflect cultural identity. These works provide a theoretical framework for analysing digital language trends in North Central Nigeria.

The digital space has thus become a key site for identity negotiation among youths in North Central Nigeria. Key impacts include:



Digital Reclamation of Indigenous Identities: Many young people use online platforms to assert their cultural heritage by creating digital content in their native languages.

Challenges of Linguistic Erosion: While digital platforms facilitate language use, there is also a risk of language erosion due to the increased dominance of English and Pidgin in digital conversations.

Diaspora Engagement: Digital platforms connect people in the diaspora with their linguistic roots, fostering transnational language communities.

Recommendations

Digitalization is reshaping linguistic and cultural identity in North Central Nigeria. While digital tools offer opportunities for language preservation and identity formation, they also present challenges such as language hybridization and potential erosion. To maximize the benefits of digitalization, the following recommendations are proposed:

Development of More Indigenous Language Apps: Encouraging software developers to create language learning and translation applications for local languages.

Government Support for Digital Language Projects: Policies should promote the inclusion of indigenous languages in digital spaces.

Increased Digital Literacy in Local Languages: Schools should integrate digital literacy programs in indigenous languages to ensure accessibility.

Academic Research on Digital Linguistics: More studies should be conducted to analyse the long-term effects of digitalization on language identity.

Conclusion

Language remains a cornerstone of cultural and religious identity in North Central Nigeria. While the digital age has introduced challenges to linguistic diversity, it also offers opportunities for language preservation through digital tools and content creation. A concerted effort involving communities, policymakers, and digital platforms is necessary to sustain indigenous languages in the modern era. Future research should explore the role of artificial intelligence and virtual reality in enhancing indigenous language visibility and usage.



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