

Indigenous Languages as Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Global Specialised Domains: A Case of Zimbabwe

Laurencia Viriri

Midlands State University National Language Institute (MSUNLI), Gweru, Zimbabwe,
(Corresponding author : viriril@staff.msu.ac.zw)

Abstract

The study explores the role of the Zimbabwean Indigenous languages as intangible cultural heritage in specialised global fields. It notes that the hegemonic nature of English has relegated indigenous languages to a marginalised position in key areas, hindering their ability to pass on cultural knowledge to future generations, thus slowing down global participation of their users and threatening the existence of the vital cultural heritage. This inquiry is grounded in the Sankofa principles and the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, with a focus on safeguarding and promoting languages and customs. Key informants such as indigenous language speakers, cultural specialists, teachers, learners, and elderly community members were purposively selected to participate in this study after obtaining their informed consent. The study used the qualitative research design. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data that were gathered through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The findings revealed the need to develop terminology and customised digital tools for the Indigenous languages so that they remain relevant in the global specialised fields. The study recommends collaboration of relevant stakeholders in the adoption of practical strategies towards language raising in specialised domains and the use of the indigenous languages together with English to enable the users to participate in global developmental issues. Furthermore, to break the dominance of English, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology, as gatekeepers of quality education, should treat indigenous languages as tools for administration, technology, and economic power.

Keywords: Indigenous languages, intangible cultural heritage, global village, specialised fields, marginalization

Introduction and Background

The study interrogates the role of constitutionally recognised indigenous languages as important components of Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage within the specialised global landscape. These languages are: Chewa, ChiBarwe, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Shangani, Shona, Sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda, and Xhosa (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) ACT 2013). The study analyses Shona terms from *Dura reMazwi eSainzi* (2024), one of the languages, to demonstrate that indigenous languages are vital tools for knowledge transmission in specialised fields and to highlight the impact of global influences on their preservation, promotion, and

development. The investigation of the role and the position of indigenous languages in specialised fields seeks to find possible ways to safeguard and promote them, ensuring their relevance and use in the 21st century and beyond. Some of these languages are spoken in neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Mozambique, and Botswana (Magwa, 2021). Examining the history of indigenous languages provides the necessary context for understanding their modern use in specialised domains, thereby underscoring the urgency of reclaiming and revitalising them in contemporary society. Despite efforts made by the colonial government to promote indigenous languages literature through the Literature Bureau, and literacy in local languages through book policy and media, the literature was highly censored, resulting in local languages playing a peripheral role in official domains. European languages, notably English, became the dominant language of education, administration, and communication. The indigenous languages were treated as “native” or “tribal” languages, and their use in formal settings was discouraged, and it attracted heavy punishment in schools. This peripheral treatment had a profound impact on the identity and culture of the local people.

Zimbabwe’s post-colonial language policy has historically marginalised indigenous languages in key areas. Notably, the Government of Zimbabwe has constitutionally recognised the importance of indigenous languages for national identity and cultural preservation. Mazuruse (2019) avers that the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), explicitly and categorically states that African languages are to be taught in schools and they must become written languages and be used without discrimination in all spheres of national life. Surprisingly, little effort has been made to raise the status of the indigenous languages, as evidenced by the continued use of English as a medium of instruction and administration in influential domains of society, over four decades after the attainment of political independence. To support the above notion, Magwa (2021) and Mudenda (2021) posit that the government has not yet made any budgetary allocation since 2013 when it pronounced the official recognition of these languages. It is against this background that Gondo (2013) argues that African languages should be removed from the periphery and brought into the core of things with regards to the everyday life of their speakers, including specialised domains. In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which recognises the importance of intangible cultural heritage in promoting cultural diversity and creativity, and Zimbabwe is a signatory to this convention. Intangible Cultural Heritage refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) includes traditions, expressions, and knowledge passed down from one generation to the next, such as language, music, dance, and crafts. This heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and is constantly recreated by communities and groups to suit their environment (UNESCO, 2003). This paper argues that language is a vital part of cultural

heritage and emphasises the need to adopt technology and develop digital tools to promote the indigenous languages in specialised fields, fostering identity and continuity.

Literature review

The study of related literature has shown that the outcry for the digitisation and safeguarding of indigenous content can only be understood from a historical context. The current literature review traces the historical status of indigenous languages to show how colonial policies have necessitated the current push for linguistic safeguarding in contemporary society. The paper conducts an in-depth investigation into the specific historical background of the Indigenous language. This case-specific historical analysis grounds the general scholarly discourse and enables readers to grasp why indigenous languages speakers are actively advocating for their preservation as an intangible cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed down from generation to generation. It includes but is not limited to customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expression, and values (UNESCO, 2003). Language as an intangible heritage is the vehicle of communication and the carrier of culture (Ngugi, 1981), and these two aspects separate humans from any other living creature. Language and culture places human beings at a higher pedestal in the animal kingdom when compared to others (Gondo, 2019; Magwa, 2019). Language helps its speakers to express their feelings, fears, world views, and the philosophies of life they value most. Ngugi (1981) reiterated that culture is a way of life that is also a social derivative, associated with the history of people and reflecting the things that are specific to them.

African languages in the precolonial era

During the precolonial era, language traditions like proverbs, songs, folktales, taboos, riddles, totems, and games for education formed a key part of their Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) and cultural heritage. These traditions were part of the African curriculum. The essence of the African traditional education was to impart positive values to the African people so as to live harmoniously and at peace with each other (Gondo & Nyoni, 2019). During the precolonial era, IKS could be tapped into as a powerful tool in imparting good behaviour and character development in children (Viriri, 2025). Elders emphasised the punishing of social deviants and the rewarding of good behaviour. This helped in bringing social cohesion in communities as people tried to live according to the social demands of their culture. Before colonialism, IKS served as a tool used by community elders to impart moral values among the young, ensuring that unity, respect, and appreciation of each other is enhanced within communities. As Falade (2013), cited in Gondo and Nyoni (2019), puts it, elders played an important role in traditional education since they were regarded as the reservoirs, guardians, and conveyors of much-needed knowledge, skills, and expertise in the community.

The colonial period

Colonialism weakened traditional culture in Africa, leading to the uprooting of the native people from their roots. This caused the native people to lose confidence in their own cultural identity. The colonisers did so with such venom and disdain that Africans began to look down upon their own languages and culture (Mudzanire & Nyota, 2019). According to Prah (1993), the aim was to create a new African who was supposed to ape the ways of the white man and learn to speak his language. By so doing, the local people were brainwashed to the extent of despising their own languages, which is part of the most integral aspects of culture. Denying people their culture is tantamount to killing them by removing them from their source of life (culture). This move by colonisers is synonymous with the removal of a healthy human being's heart, thereby inflicting a slow painful death (Magwa, 2019). This was meant to disempower the natives and to denigrate their language and culture, resulting in a lack of proper documentation, innovative preservation methods, and marginalisation of the native speakers, as the custodians of African heritage. African languages were dominant in family, social, and cultural domains and continued to be downgraded, particularly in the education system (Chimhundu, 1993). During the colonial era, African languages were marginalised while English was established as the official language, leading to the decline of local cultures and traditions. A language is marginalised when it is not given the same status as others or another within the linguistic ecology (Kululuka-Hulme et al., 2023).

The post-colonial language status

The colonial hangover persisted and is still persevering in the Zimbabwean formal education system, which is also one of the specialised domains, decades after the country gained political independence. Sibanda (2019) avers that the Zimbabwean policy on language in education perpetuates and reinforces the intent, purpose, and agenda of the colonial language policy and practice. Colonialism sought to alter the situation not only politically, socially, and economically, but also academically, including language issues in education circles. Seven years after independence, the Education Act of 1987 was passed to address English hegemony and the prevalence of the colonial language policy in general, insisting that English be used as the medium of instruction from the fourth grade upwards. It was revised in 1990. Sadly, the revised Education Act was a mere reinforcement of the dominance and hegemony of English (Magwa, 2021). Apart from the Education Act of 1987, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013 states that "the state and all institutions and agencies of government at every level must ensure that all officially recognised languages are treated equitably." While the constitution provides a legal framework for teaching indigenous languages in schools, it does not give details on how the teaching of these languages must be done (Phiri, 2021). Contrary to the intention of the government to end English hegemony, the pro-colonial language policy prevailing in the country made the general populace associate

speaking English with a higher social and economic power status (Thondhlana, 2000). Nhongo (2013) concurs with Thondhlana, arguing that most Zimbabweans contend that English is a global language and crucial for Zimbabwean citizens to participate in the global economy through it. Chirimaunga (2023) reiterates the same sentiments, saying that English is widely recognised as the international language of scientific and technological advancement and linguistic evolution in developing countries. This has resulted in stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and students preferring to use English from Early Childhood Development (ECD) to tertiary levels of education. This is worsened by educators in institutes of higher learning who prefer to teach indigenous language modules like literature and grammar using English as the medium of instruction. The status quo on language matters in most African countries, including Zimbabwe, is a result of several factors, among them being a negative attitude towards the use of indigenous languages, globalisation, economic factors, and a lack of will by government officials to promote indigenous languages (Sibanda, 2019; Viriri, 2003; Prah, 2006).

Language as an intangible cultural heritage

Language, the mother tongue in particular, is a vital component of human life. Our mother tongue, or language of primary socialisation, provides our initial contact with the world and facilitates the formation of values and our view of ourselves (Roy-Campbell & Gwete, 1997). Language helps the speakers to shape their worldview as they interact with their immediate environment. The culture of every group is engraved in its spoken or written language as a means of communication. In the same vein, Ngugi (1986) argues that language has a dual character. It is a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language and culture are intertwined, and there is a thin line between them. Magwa (2019) concurs with the above notion as he maintains that it is not possible to isolate a language from the culture, beliefs, and eloquence of its speakers. Language is a cultural asset through which we transmit knowledge and information, articulate values, beliefs, and traditions, and even past achievements (Viriri, 2003). Language is the master key that unlocks the cultural knowledge bank, which forms an integral part of intangible heritage that needs safeguarding and proper management so that it can be passed on to posterity. This paper argues that the use of the 'elite' language undermines the cultural base of the sidelined language groups. Roy-Campbell and Gwete (1997) assert that if a language is devalued, then the culture embodied in that language is also devalued. Languages must be viewed and treated as complementary. While English offers access to global knowledge and connectivity, the indigenous languages provide a vital link to the cultural traditions of their speakers. This paper challenges the view that English is capable of representing the African cultures and languages in the global village, thus highlighting the importance of using indigenous languages in preserving culture and content. To guard against misrepresentation and dilution of the indigenous languages in digital and specialised domains, indigenous languages' corpora and tools must be developed to enhance their use in such contexts. Efforts to safeguard and ensure that

indigenous languages remain relevant and prominent in the digital age are critical, given the strong connection between language and development. Despite the marginalisation of indigenous languages in critical areas, the nexus between language and development remains a reality.

The advancement of a nation depends on the effective use of its local languages as a medium of communication and the safeguarding of its cultural beliefs. As Magwa (2019) puts it, language and culture are key elements for building a developed society. He further argues that countries like Korea, Japan, and China have developed because they use their languages in formal training and education. Magwa (2019) adds that research conducted has revealed that the least developed countries use European languages in their education. Magwa's statement underscores a form of linguistic imperialism where the underdevelopment of a country is attributed to its educational system that ignores the native linguistic capital of its citizens.

Challenges arising from the lack of digital tools in the indigenous languages.

The lack of digital resources makes it difficult for the indigenous languages and their cultures to reach a wider audience, particularly young people who are techno-savvy and those in the diaspora. The absence of online cultural content limits opportunities for knowledge sharing and cultural exchange, resulting in diminishing the languages' presence and significance in the digital spaces. As Chirimaunga (2023) points out, there are currently very few techno-scientific dictionaries available in indigenous languages. The lack of such digital resources makes standardization of the writing system of indigenous languages difficult, causing some linguistic uncertainties that may put the languages at risk of extinction in specialised arenas. Limited use of indigenous languages in techno-scientific contexts limit indigenous language speakers' participation in socio-economic spheres using their mother tongue. Prah (1995) argues that Africa's failure to use its own languages in the workplace is the reason why Africa continues to lag when compared to other continents in terms of health and economy. He further argues that this perspective arises from educated Africans who assert that African languages have not yet reached a level of development sufficient to serve as effective instructional media. They believe that using African languages for educational purposes could contribute to the decline of the standards of education in Africa. However, there is an urgent need to demystify this notion by taking a pragmatic approach that involves developing digital tools in marginalised indigenous languages in the country. The continued limited use of indigenous languages in the digital space devalues the languages' social prestige and importance, resulting in the weakening of cultural identity. The deficiency of digital tools kills innovation and creativity among the indigenous language speakers, hindering the development of new content and innovation in these languages. The hurdles discussed in this paper signal a decline in the use of indigenous languages in digital spaces, which

is a serious threat to the preservation of these languages, which are vital components of the country's cultural heritage.

Addressing this gap is key to ensuring the languages' survival, promoting cultural preservation, and empowerment indigenous language speakers in the digital age. Viriri (2003) asserts that embracing technology might heal the cultural wounds and restore the cultures of Africa, which colonialism has sought to obliterate to achieve its goals. Whilst Viriri (2003) calls for technological tools to heal cultural wounds and restore African cultures, it is important to note that Zimbabwe is over four decades into independence, yet the country continues to witness a leadership that lacks the political will to visibly support the digital local content creation and use in indigenous languages. Gwerevende and Mthombeni (2023) add that speakers and advocates of indigenous languages can harness digital tools and platforms to foster collaborations, share valuable resources, and revitalise their languages in an unprecedented way.

Addressing the current gap in digital tools and resources

Languages serve as powerful tools for expressing, preserving, and transmitting cultural values, traditions, and collective memories within a community (Ajani et al., 2024). Language functions as a conduit for the intergenerational transfer of the cultural heritage, allowing older generations to share their accumulated wisdom, historical narratives, and ancestral knowledge with younger age bands. When language becomes extinct, the vital intergenerational link is broken, hence the need to safeguard the storehouses of unique knowledge through embracing digital media technology. To reshape the landscape of language preservation, indigenous language speakers in collaboration with technology experts should develop online apps and software tools which include pronunciation guides, text analysis software, languages translation software and adopt the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube which serve as virtual hubs where speakers can share content and stories, facilitating engagement with those who are passionate about learning and preservation of the endangered languages in the global arenas, hence bringing together unique knowledge and skills.

The production of audio-visual content like podcasts, videos, and interactive storytelling offers new methods for documenting, learning, and revitalizing the indigenous languages. In this digital era, leveraging digital media technologies offers a promising avenue for the revitalisation and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems and languages (Ajani et al., 2024). If the indigenous language speakers are to realise their dream of integrating their tongues as intangible cultural heritage in specialised arenas, practical steps have to be taken towards the demystification of the view that indigenous languages cannot function in other domains except in the home. To address the current gap in digital tools

and resources, the compilation of comprehensive digital dictionaries and glossaries that cover various languages and dialects is key. These resources provide easy access to definitions, usage examples, and cultural contexts. In this regard, one of the language institutes in Zimbabwe has taken a giant step towards the demystification process. Midlands State University's National Language Institute (MSUNLI) is continuing the Science and Technical Translation (STT) legacy of the African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) at the University of Zimbabwe, which closed its doors after achieving significant progress in using STT in Zimbabwe. MSUNLI is building upon ALRI's historic progress by developing a bilingual science glossary in each of the officially recognised languages in Zimbabwe. Moreover, the translation of law documents, including the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the Highway Code, attests to the fact that every language is capable of explaining scientific and legal terms when given space. Equivalent terms were created to match the English ones for ease of dissemination of information to the grassroots level. Language practitioners and researchers, collaborating with relevant stakeholders, are creating new terms through coinage and rephonologisation strategies. Coinage was used where there were no direct equivalents or where there were no sounds near the indigenous ones, whilst the rephonologisation strategy was used to enable English sounds to fit into native sound system. The language researchers have coined and rephonologised words successfully in *Dura reMazwi eSainzi* (2024), (Indigenous Languages Glossary of Scientific Terms), as demonstrated by the Shona examples below.

English words	Indigenous language equivalent	Strategy used
ammeter	chipimamoto	coinage
galvanometer	chiyeramagetsi	coinage
solute	chinyungudutswa	coinage
solvent	chinyungudutso	coinage
transistor	chibatidzamoto	coinage
anode	anodhi	rephonologization
barometer	bharomita	rephonologisation
biogas	bhayogasi	rephonologisation
carbon	kabhoni	rephonologisation
diesel	dhiziri	rephonologisation

It is important to note that the above rephonologised words from the translated document are written as prescribed in the current indigenous language writing system, as opposed to the manner in which they are pronounced in daily speech.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative design to provide a holistic understanding of the indigenous languages' status and their role as ICH. Qualitative data collection methods, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were used in this study. Drawing data from multiple methods ensures comprehensive and credible findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group discussions helped in exploring shared perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of various groups of people related to the indigenous languages. On the other hand, document analysis assisted the researcher in navigating issues related to language policy, legal frameworks, and the level of government support for language development in the country. Analysis of documents helps the researcher to learn about distributed or private knowledge (Hammarberg et al., 2016). An analysis of the translated document from English to an indigenous language, such as "*Dura reMazwi eSainzi*," helped the researcher to demystify the perception that indigenous languages are incapable of explaining specialised content or terms. Twenty indigenous language-speaking informants from both rural and urban backgrounds were selected using the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The informants included language experts, educators, traditional leaders who are the custodians of cultural knowledge and values, and cultural heritage experts. Each group of participants was key and unique in its contribution towards cultural heritage issues, since the collaboration of stakeholders is the springboard for the success of the transmission of cultural knowledge to future generations. Ethical considerations were put in place. Participants gave their informed consent in verbal and written form after being informed about the study's specifics. Collected data were subjected to thematic analysis by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights from interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Thematic analysis is all about interpretation and, therefore, requires a higher level of inference (Vaisamoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and the collected data, the researcher used pseudonyms and coding. Participants were reassured that the study's findings were intended for academic use only.

Theoretical framework

The *Sankofa* concept (Slater, 2019) and UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage serve as the study's guiding principles. These frameworks offer a strong foundation and insightful perspectives for this study. *Sankofa*, a word and symbol from the Akan people of Ghana, means "go back and fetch it" (Alkalimat, 2021). It emphasises the importance of a purposeful return to the past to reclaim, reinterpret, and apply valuable central knowledge for the present and future (Dumavor, 2025). The *Sankofa* concept encourages individuals to remember, repossess, and breathe new life into the valuable knowledge, traditions, and practices that originate

from their heritage. The *Sankofa* concept is evident in this study, as the researcher employs the concept of revisiting and exploring the historical development of the indigenous languages, their significance during pre-colonial and colonial times, and their growth since independence. The researcher undertakes this historical examination to demonstrate how the inherited colonial legacy influences the status and use of indigenous languages in specialised fields, and how terminology development and digital documentation help in providing effective strategies for integrating them into specialised domains such as education, law, science, and technology. This concept is relevant in this study as it stresses the importance of community involvement, particularly in terminology development and decision-making. As part of the study's methodology, the researcher engages with indigenous language speakers from diverse backgrounds to gather their insights and perceptions about the use of language and its cultural importance in specialised areas. UNESCO's 2003 Convention complements the *Sankofa* concept by offering a framework for identifying, documenting, and protecting elements of intangible cultural heritage, including the indigenous languages, with a focus on vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and traditional folklore. The convention informs language speakers in developing and implementing community-based documentation projects using user-friendly digital software, apps, and tools such as dictionaries and glossaries to help safeguard the intangible culture of indigenous language speakers, making it accessible to a wider audience in digital spaces.

Results and Discussion

The results revealed that indigenous languages have been pushed to the periphery as far as their role in specialised domains is concerned. Interviews administered by the researcher elicited varying views from the participants on their use as intangible cultural heritage in the global specialised fields.

Most participants concurred with the notion that safeguarding indigenous languages as intangible cultural heritage is the only gateway to their usability in the specialised domains in the digital space. Teacher A had this to say, "Digitising our local languages helps in preserving and making them accessible to the users in global spaces." This is in line with Lantern's (2025) assertion that digitisation becomes handy in providing the necessary means and platforms to promote the accessibility and preservation of local languages. Teacher B emphasised the need to embrace technology as a way of enhancing the use of our local languages in specialised areas, saying, "Technology is key in developing and empowering local languages to be visible in other domains in this digital era. It makes the documentation and sharing of the local content easy." This implies that technology empowers local language speakers to share information and knowledge, thereby fostering true digital inclusion. Some participants blamed the lack of terminology in specialised domains for the challenges that indigenous languages are facing today and

emphasised the need to raise their status to that of the dominant languages, English in particular, by developing specialised terms. One student, Kirsty (pseudonym), categorically stated that, “Unless the status of indigenous languages is raised to that of English by developing terminology in specialised areas, it will remain irrelevant in modern communication and stifle career opportunities”. This implies that in this digital age, for indigenous languages to remain relevant to future generations, they have to be treated as vehicles of communication and a gateway to better job opportunities. Through document analysis, the researcher noted that to date, the specialised terms contained in five specialised indigenous language dictionaries developed in the 1990s have not reached the intended users, the students. In this digital age, little or no effort has been made to make indigenous content available in digital formats. Most of it is still in print form. In the same line of thinking, Lantern (2025) echoed that it is an undisputed fact that Zimbabwe is behind in technological issues, as it is heavily under-resourced in indigenous languages digitisation technology. Unless such critical information or terminologies are made available in school and university libraries, the myth that indigenous languages have not fully developed to function in specialised spheres will continue unopposed. One of the linguists, Mr Huyo (pseudonym), passionately said, “In a bid to end the war on specialised terminology deficiency, there is a need to embrace courses in dictionary pedagogy and to advocate for a dictionary policy in the country”. The development of such a policy will enhance the creation, innovative documentation, adoption, and use of specialised terminology at every level of education, and it will cascade easily to other critical domains. The importance of term creation is buttressed by Nkomo (2008), who argues that term creation is a tool of revitalising, empowering, and accommodating Indigenous African languages. One of the community members, Mr Chigayo (pseudonym), was quick to point out the need to train and educate personnel in specialised domains to enhance the effective communication of complex concepts in local languages. He said, “Not everyone is familiar with the terms that are used in specialised fields, hence the need to train and educate the staff members in such areas so that they appreciate the use of such terms in their local languages.” It is clear from the participant’s contribution that using indigenous languages in specialised contexts is a process and not an event. It calls for careful preparation, cooperation, and financial commitment.

The argument of the researcher is that when speakers of the native languages are trained and educated in their local languages, they grasp technical concepts easily, reducing misunderstandings and misinterpretations emanating from translations that may take place to ease the understanding of concepts. Sibanda (2025) corroborates that scientific concepts, no matter how complicated they may be, are first located in the indigenous corner of the mind, which processes them in its indigenous language and culture by trying to understand and apply them in the context of their values. The researcher further argues

that the use of local languages in specialised fields helps in making technical concepts culturally relevant as they convey context-specific knowledge more effectively, thus making specialised domains more relevant. Although the use of specialised terminology is key, some hurdles hinder the implementation of such a noble cause. One of the cultural experts, Mrs Hore (pseudonym), was quick to point out the challenges, saying, “There is a problem of limited technological resources and expertise, and the digital divide also worsens the situation on the ground when it comes to the implementation of the innovative ideas.” What it therefore means is that the devil lies at the implementation stage. The lack of funding, institutional support, negative attitude towards the use of local languages in critical domains, and lack of awareness of the importance of local languages among speakers and policymakers derail the use of such languages in specialised spheres. Although there are many stumbling blocks lying ahead of the digitisation of indigenous languages, the paper argues that the need to revitalise and empower these languages in the digital era remains critical because the benefits outweigh the challenges. As long as the challenges inhibiting the digitisation of indigenous languages are not addressed, in terms of functionality, they will remain at the periphery and on the sidelines in key domains.

Recommendations

The recommendations below aim to ensure that digitisation is not just a technological solution to enhance the use of local languages in the specialised domains, but a culturally enriching and inclusive effort to safeguard and promote the indigenous languages for future generations. This study recommends that:

- (i) Research institutes develop multilingual glossaries in fields like Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), modern medicine, engineering, and law, among others.
- (ii) For indigenous languages to survive globally as living heritage, they must exist digitally. The institutes must prioritise the development of digital language resources, including datasets that technology companies require to include indigenous languages in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and software. The datasets are important in training Large Language Models (LLMs), machine translation tools like Google Translate, and voice assistants to accurately parse Zimbabwean indigenous languages.
- (iii) The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology must enforce the teaching of indigenous languages modules using the mother tongue. To break the dominance of English, the aforementioned ministries, as gatekeepers of quality education, must treat indigenous languages as tools for administration, technology, and economic power.

- (iv) The aforementioned ministries and research institutes must establish a joint annual forum on language intellectualisation to evaluate how effectively Zimbabwean indigenous languages are being integrated into global, digital, and academic spheres so that they do not lag.

Conclusion

The indigenous languages have enormous potential and value in the world's specialised fields as intangible cultural heritage if terminology is developed, accepted, and used in digital spaces. Zimbabwe can guarantee the language's survival, development, and relevance by drawing lessons from the colonial past to inform the current and future language policies, particularly in the use of indigenous languages in specialised fields and by putting the UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage principles of safeguarding indigenous languages as cultural intangible heritage into practice. A comprehensive approach towards language documentation, instruction, community involvement, international cooperation, and strategic use of technology should be embraced to improve the status and use of Indigenous languages in specialised fields. The study of the indigenous languages should be viewed not only as a linguistic pursuit but also as a vital component of Zimbabwe's cultural identity, economic development, and global engagement. The recommendations in this study are designed to achieve that goal, and the implementation of the above-mentioned measures can empower the indigenous language speakers to develop terminology to showcase and preserve their linguistic heritage in the digital world.

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