



Language Patterns: How Tiktok is Reshaping Uganda's Linguistic Landscapes

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Abstract

This study explores how TikTok is transforming the linguistic interactions of Uganda, especially among youth. It examines how language use, code-switching, and the introduction of new digital dialects can impact a rapidly changing linguistic situation in a digital society. Uganda is a multilingual nation with over 40 indigenous languages, facing considerable pressure to experience a language pattern in which TikTok promotes and strengthens the hegemony of English and Luganda while further marginalizing smaller language groups. The paper analyses 100 TikTok videos and observes participants to show how economic incentives have accelerated linguistic homogeneity through hybrid forms, such as “Luglish.” Although TikTok allows for creative outlets through digital slang and code-switching, the platform undermines indigenous language preservation as its content favors the use of dominant languages. There are erosive effects to the broader linguistic landscape, yet, counter-movements involving TikTok should not be ignored because TikTok allows for language revival efforts. The study ends with a discussion of policy recommendations that facilitate a blending of significantly traditional forms of life with digital modernity in a multilingual Uganda.

1. Introduction

TikTok, launched internationally in 2017 by ByteDance, is a short-form video platform where users create video clips synchronized with music, and its algorithm-driven “For You” page curates hyper-localized content, enabling the rapid diffusion of speech styles (Galer, 2024). With over 1.5 billion monthly active users globally, its rapid growth in Uganda, which reached approximately 5.5 million users by 2024, (DataReportal, 2024) has profoundly influenced linguistic interactions, especially among youth. As a platform composed of almost exclusively short-form video content, TikTok has become a space where language is not only used for

communication but also for performance, humor, and identity formation.

This phenomenon occurs within Uganda's vibrant multilingual landscape, which comprises 40 indigenous languages (Simons & Fennig, 2018, p. 130), with English as the official medium and Swahili as co-official (Lewis et al., 2016, as cited in (Tembe, 2008, p. 17). Historically, these languages have coexisted, yet urban youth increasingly default to English-infused hybrids like "Lugish" in informal and online spaces. "Lugish" refers to a hybrid that combines Luganda with English (Nakayiza & Ssentanda, 2015, p. 8). The digital revolution has altered this dynamic, favoring languages that provide broader accessibility and engagement (Mukuthuria, 2006, p. 78). On TikTok, these evolving usages can be understood as dynamic language patterns—the observable features of speech like vocabulary, syntax, and code-switching that characterize how a community communicates (Coupland, 2016, p. 427). Unlike static grammar, these patterns are fluid, shaped by context, identity, and media, and can signal emerging norms before full language change occurs (Eckert, 2018, p. 12).

While TikTok offers an avenue for creative expression, it also raises critical concerns about its role in language patterns. Although other languages are used, English and Luganda dominate most content as creators seek larger audiences, marginalizing minority languages with fewer speakers and less digital presence. One of the most visible linguistic changes on the platform is the widespread use of code-switching, where users blend English with Luganda or other indigenous languages in a single video. This practice enhances relatability and humor; it also reflects a gradual shift toward linguistic homogenization (Nassenstein & Hollington, 2015, p. 203), contributing to the erosion of linguistic purity. Beyond code-switching, TikTok has fueled the development of new digital slang words and phrases blending English and indigenous languages which, while innovative, alters traditional language structures (Ssentanda, 2014, p. 150). This shift creates a generational gap, as younger Ugandans highly active on digital platforms become more exposed to English-dominated content, reducing their proficiency in native languages and potentially affecting intergenerational communication.

Despite these challenges, TikTok also offers opportunities for language preservation, as some content creators use the platform to promote indigenous languages through storytelling and cultural education (Ndhlovu, 2020, p. 58). Consequently, this paper explores how TikTok influences language patterns in Uganda, examining its complex effects on indigenous language use, code-switching, and the formation of digital

linguistic identities. These preservation efforts demonstrate that digital platforms can serve as interactive spaces for cultural transmission, reaching audiences who might not engage with traditional media. By incorporating proverbs, folktales, and lessons in native languages, creators reinforce linguistic skills and cultural knowledge among younger users. Moreover, TikTok enables the documentation and circulation of endangered languages, offering a dynamic complement to formal language revitalization initiatives.

2. Literature Review

Social media platforms have profoundly reshaped linguistic behaviors worldwide, accelerating the dominance of global languages while marginalizing indigenous ones (Crystal, 2012, p. 45). In Uganda, this phenomenon manifests vividly on TikTok, where English and Luganda dominate digital communication, often at the expense of minority languages like Runyankore and Ateso (Simons & Fennig, 2018, p. 130). The platform's algorithmic design prioritizes content in widely spoken languages, creating a feedback loop that reinforces linguistic hierarchies and sidelines less prevalent tongues (Zhou, 2021, p. 32). This dynamic raise critical questions about the long-term survival of Uganda's linguistic diversity in an increasingly digital world. Crystal (2012), argues that the global spread of dominant languages is accelerated by digital media, which often sidelines local linguistic practices. Simons and Fennig (2018) demonstrate that in Uganda, minority languages face increasing marginalization as platforms like TikTok favor content in widely spoken tongues, a trend reinforced by algorithmic curation highlighted by Zhou. This suggests that without intentional interventions, digital platforms may inadvertently entrench linguistic inequalities, threatening the survival of indigenous languages.

The emergence of hybrid language forms on TikTok reflects the creative adaptation of Ugandan users to digital communication (Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 67). Terms like "*abantu bagoing wa*", *sharingnga*, *nyiga ka plus*, and "*tambuzza video*" exemplify how global and local linguistic elements blend to form new digital dialects (Tagg, 2015, p. 89). While these innovations enhance engagement and relatability, they also contribute to the erosion of traditional language structures because younger generations prioritize communicative efficiency over linguistic purity (Ndhlovu, 2020, p. 58). This trend underscores the tension between linguistic innovation and preservation in digital spaces. Androutsopoulos emphasizes that digital platforms foster new forms of sociolinguistic expression where users creatively mix languages to navigate online communication, while Tagg (2015) highlights the performative and relational functions of such linguistic blending in digital discourse. Ndhlovu

further cautions that this hybridity, though innovative, risks undermining linguistic heritage by normalizing nonstandard forms. However, this linguistic hybridity also raises questions about cultural authenticity and identity, as the blending of languages may dilute indigenous linguistic expressions. It challenges scholars to reconsider what constitutes “authentic” language use in online spaces, making TikTok a site of both linguistic creativity and cultural negotiation.

Code-switching between English, Luganda, and indigenous languages has become a defining feature of Ugandan TikTok (Nassenstein & Hollington, 2015, p. 203). This practice, while fostering inclusivity and creativity, also accelerates the shift away from monolingualism in native tongues, potentially weakening linguistic competence over time (Batibo, 2005, p. 94). Scholars argue that the fluidity of digital communication encourages linguistic hybridity but may also dilute the richness of traditional languages, leaving them vulnerable to gradual obsolescence (Ssentanda, 2014, p. 150). Nassenstein and Hollington observe that code-switching on digital platforms enables users to navigate multiple linguistic and social identities simultaneously, fostering creativity and inclusivity. Batibo and Ssentanda caution that such practices may contribute to the gradual erosion of native language competence and cultural knowledge. Yet, this shift can also be interpreted as a form of linguistic empowerment, where speakers assert agency by redefining how their identities are expressed online. Rather than showing loss, code-switching reflects adaptive multilingualism shaped by digital realities, demonstrating how Ugandans creatively sustain cultural relevance while navigating global communication norms.

The economic incentives tied to TikTok content creation further intensify linguistic marginalization (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 83). In Uganda, influencers and digital entrepreneurs often opt for English or Luganda to maximize visibility and monetization opportunities, inadvertently reinforcing the dominance of these languages (Agaba, 2024, p. 21). This commercialization of language mirrors broader global trends, where market forces dictate linguistic vitality, often sidelining languages perceived as less economically viable (Grin, 2003, p. 117). The result is a digital landscape where financial pragmatism trumps cultural preservation. However, this dynamic also exposes the intersection of language and digital capitalism, where linguistic choice becomes a strategic economic act rather than mere cultural expression. It highlights how globalization redefines linguistic hierarchies through profit-driven algorithms. Consequently, TikTok emerges as both a marketplace of creativity and a site of cultural compromise.

Intergenerational communication gaps are another worrying consequence of language patterns on TikTok (Batibo, 2005, p. 94). Younger Ugandans, immersed in digital dialects, increasingly favor English and Luganda, while older generations struggle to connect with these evolving linguistic norms (Ssentanda, 2014, p. 150). This divide threatens cultural continuity, as language serves as a primary vehicle for transmitting heritage and identity (Ndhlovu, 2020, p. 58). Without deliberate efforts to bridge this gap, the loss of indigenous languages could sever critical ties to Uganda's cultural past. Batibo argues that language shift among younger generations often signifies broader sociocultural transformations driven by modernization and globalization. Similarly, Ssentanda observes that diminishing use of indigenous languages weakens intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, a concern Ndhlovu (2020) links to identity fragmentation in postcolonial societies. This highlights how TikTok not only reflects linguistic change but also exposes the widening generational divide in cultural memory and communication.

Despite these challenges, Agaba explains that some content creators are using TikTok to preserve and promote indigenous languages (Agaba, 2024, p. 27). These preservations, which Zhou noted included initiatives such as sharing traditional proverbs, folktales, and language lessons in native tongues, demonstrate the platform's potential as a tool for linguistic revitalization (Zhou, 2021, p. 35). However, Makoni and Pennycook suggest that the visibility of such content remains limited compared to mainstream digital dialects, highlighting the need for greater support and amplification of these efforts (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 77). Agaba (2024) emphasizes the transformative role of digital creators in reclaiming and revitalizing indigenous languages through participatory media. In addition, Zhou illustrates how online storytelling and proverb-sharing foster cultural continuity in virtual spaces. However, Makoni and Pennycook caution that structural inequalities within digital economies constrain the reach of such initiatives. This underscores that while TikTok offers opportunities for linguistic revival, meaningful impact requires sustained visibility and institutional support for indigenous content creators.

Scholars like Crystal and Holliday explain that theoretical frameworks like Internet Linguistics and covert prestige offer valuable insights into these dynamics (Crystal, 2005, p. 12; Holliday, 2021, p. 45). Furthermore, digital platforms accelerate language change, while covert prestige explains why youth-led slang gains traction despite being stigmatized in formal contexts (Holliday, 2021, p. 45). Together, these lenses reveal the complex interplay of technology, culture, and economics in shaping linguistic trends on TikTok. Crystal argues that Internet Linguistics provides a

framework for understanding how digital media reshape language through speed, creativity, and global connectivity. Holliday complements this view by showing how covert prestige empowers marginalized linguistic forms, granting social value to nonstandard speech within youth and online cultures. This suggests that TikTok operates as a dynamic arena where informal linguistic practices gain legitimacy, redefining social hierarchies of language use.

According to Muftah (2024, p. 8), policy interventions are urgently needed to address the linguistic inequalities perpetuated by digital platforms. Advocates call for algorithmic transparency to ensure fair representation of minority languages, as well as digital literacy programs that empower users to navigate these spaces without sacrificing their linguistic heritage (Zhou, 2021, p. 35). Without systemic changes, indigenous languages risk being further marginalized in the digital age. Muftah emphasizes that policy frameworks must evolve to confront the structural biases embedded in digital technologies that privilege dominant languages. Zhou adds that equitable participation in online spaces depends on empowering users through education and inclusive platform design. This highlights that sustainable linguistic diversity online requires collaboration between policymakers, technologists, and communities to reform the systems that reproduce digital marginalization.

The tension between linguistic innovation and preservation lies at the heart of Uganda's digital linguistic landscape (Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 67). While TikTok fosters creativity and connectivity, it also poses significant threats to linguistic diversity (Crystal, 2012, p. 45). Balancing these competing forces requires a multifaceted approach that leverages the platform's potential for preservation while mitigating its erosive effects (Agaba, 2024, p. 27). Androutsopoulos argues that digital platforms like TikTok encourage innovative language practices, enabling users to experiment with hybrid forms and new expressions. Crystal underscores the accompanying risk, noting that the dominance of global languages can undermine the vitality of indigenous tongues, while Agaba advocates for strategic interventions to harness digital spaces for linguistic preservation. This tension reveals that fostering both innovation and heritage requires deliberate, context-sensitive strategies to prevent cultural erosion.

Finally, Ndhlovu says that, the future of Uganda's linguistic diversity hinges on collective action (Ndhlovu, 2020, p. 58). By amplifying indigenous voices, advocating for equitable digital policies, and fostering intergenerational dialogue, stakeholders can help ensure that TikTok becomes a space where all languages thrive

(Ssentanda, 2014, p. 152). The stakes are high, as the survival of Uganda's linguistic heritage depends on the choices made today in the digital realm. Nonetheless, sustaining linguistic diversity online requires more than advocacy. It demands structural transformation in digital governance and platform algorithms. Without systemic support, indigenous language promotion risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative. True preservation, therefore, must align cultural activism with technological innovation.

Despite growing scholarship on digital multilingualism and language use on social media, there remains a significant gap in understanding how TikTok's algorithmic structures specifically influence linguistic visibility and the survival of minority languages in Uganda. Existing studies often emphasize language use patterns but overlook the socio-economic and technological forces that shape linguistic hierarchies online. Moreover, limited empirical research explores user perceptions of linguistic identity and authenticity within Uganda's digital spaces, particularly among rural and marginalized communities. There is also insufficient attention to how intergenerational communication and cultural transmission are affected by hybrid digital dialects.

3. Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, this study investigates the role of TikTok in shaping language patterns in Uganda. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for examining social and linguistic phenomena as it allows for an in-depth understanding of meaning-making, language use, and the dynamics of digital communication (Creswell, 2014, p. 32). This approach enables the researcher to capture the fluid, contextual, and performative nature of language as it appears within digital spaces. The study focuses specifically on TikTok rather than other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter) because TikTok is currently one of the fastest-growing platforms in Uganda, especially among young people and urban digital communities. TikTok's short-form video format uniquely integrates spoken language, captions, background audio, visual cues, and interactive features such as duets, stitches, and comment threads. This multimodal structure makes TikTok particularly suitable for studying contemporary language practices, including code-switching, slang creation, and linguistic creativity. Unlike text-based platforms, TikTok foregrounds oral and performative language, which is central to Uganda's multilingual sociolinguistic context. Therefore, TikTok provides a rich site for observing emerging language trends and everyday linguistic negotiations in real time.

Data collection employed two qualitative methods: content analysis and participant observation. Content analysis was used to systematically examine language patterns within TikTok videos, while participant observation allowed the researcher to gain contextual insight into how language is used, interpreted, and circulated within TikTok communities (Yin, 2018, p. 15). Together, these methods facilitated a holistic understanding of linguistic practices in Uganda's digital space. A sample of 100 TikTok videos was selected for content analysis. The selection was purposive rather than random, as the study sought to capture linguistically rich and socially influential content (Krippendorff, 2019, p. 64). Videos were chosen based on three criteria. First, the videos had to be created by Ugandan-based content creators or clearly target Ugandan audiences through language use, cultural references, or hashtags. Second, the videos were high-impact, determined by high levels of engagement such as views, likes, shares, and comments, as these indicators suggest wider linguistic influence and circulation. Third, the sample aimed for linguistic diversity, including content that used English, Luganda, Runyankole, Ateso, Swahili, and mixed-language expressions.

The videos were not restricted to a single topic; instead, they were drawn from a range of popular content categories such as comedy, storytelling, music, social commentary, religious content, and everyday life narratives. This thematic openness allowed the study to observe language use across different communicative purposes and social contexts. All videos analyzed were created within a defined six-month period preceding the data collection phase, ensuring that the findings reflected current and relevant language trends rather than outdated practices.

Participant observation involved the researcher actively engaging with TikTok as a user over the same period. This included following Ugandan creators, interacting with content through likes and comments, and observing language patterns suggested by TikTok's algorithm. This approach enabled the researcher to understand how language trends are amplified, repeated, or transformed through algorithmic visibility and user interaction (Angrosino, 2007, p. 45). The researcher maintained reflexive field notes to document observed patterns, emerging slang, and contextual nuances of language use. Data from both content analysis and participant observation were analyzed using thematic analysis, which provided a systematic way to identify, categorize, and interpret recurring linguistic patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). The key themes that emerged included language dominance, code-switching practices, the emergence of digital slang, and generational differences in language

use. This methodological design acknowledges the dynamic and evolving nature of digital communication while ensuring analytical rigor and transparency.

4. Findings and Discussion

The 100 TikTok videos analyzed in this study were purposively distributed among ten Ugandan content creators to ensure linguistic, demographic, and thematic diversity rather than random representation. The allocation reflected creators' posting frequency, audience engagement, and relevance to emerging language trends on the platform. Specifically, 12 videos were analyzed from Coach Rickie, 10 each from Chicken Chicken, Sheilaprice, wicky Beddings, Chefgodwin Uganda, and Fashionlite, 11 each from Singlefamily11 and Fashionlite, 9 each from Kasuku and Musawo Julie, and 8 from Reallife256, yielding a total of 100 videos. Regarding verification, direct links to all analyzed videos were documented at the time of data collection and can be provided as a supplementary appendix to the study. Coach Rickie, Chickenchicken focuses on motivational and lifestyle content, and fitness, often blending English and Luganda to engage a young, aspirational audience. His videos incorporate proverbs, personal anecdotes, and humor, making his content relatable to the urban youth navigating career and personal growth. Meanwhile, Sheilaprice specializes in celebrity gossip and entertainment news, primarily using English with occasional Luganda slang to appeal to her audience. Her content thrives on viral trends, leveraging hashtags and challenges to maximize reach.

Wicky Beddings targets homemakers and interior design enthusiasts, showcasing home appliances, décor tips, and organizational hacks. The creator's use of Luganda, interspersed with English product descriptions, reflects the linguistic preferences of Uganda's middle-class consumers. Similarly, Chefgodwin caters to food lovers, posting cooking tutorials that fuse traditional Ugandan recipes with modern culinary techniques. Kasuku, known for satire and political commentary, employs code-switching between English, Luganda, and local slang to critique societal issues. His humor resonates with young adults, particularly those disillusioned with political rhetoric. In contrast, Musawo Julie (whose name translates to "Doctor Julie") creates health-related content, simplifying medical advice using a mix of English and Luganda. Her videos often feature visual aids and captions to enhance comprehension, targeting both urban and semi-urban viewers.

Reallife256 documents travel and adventure, promoting Uganda's tourism while blending storytelling with practical travel tips. The creator's language choices—predominantly English with regional language snippets—cater to both local and

international followers. Fashionlite focuses on lifestyle and beauty trends, using youthful slang and global fashion jargon to engage youth. Finally, Singlefamily11 offers home management advice, particularly for single parents, using Luganda to foster a sense of community and cultural solidarity. Linguistic patterns and audience engagement. All creators adopt hybrid language strategies, but their linguistic choices are strategically tailored to their niches: Entertainment/Celebrity Gossip (Sheilaprice, Kasuku): Fast-paced, slang-heavy English with Luganda punchlines. Lifestyle/Home Management (wicky Beddings,): Luganda-dominated for relatability, with English keywords for search engine optimization. Education/Health (Musawo Julie, Coach Rickie): Balanced bilingualism to ensure clarity and authority. Food/Travel (Chefgodwin Uganda, Reallife256): English for technical terms, Luganda for cultural nuance. Daily posting schedules and algorithm-savvy tactics (e.g., trending sounds, hashtags) amplify their visibility, but this also reinforces the dominance of English and Luganda. Minority languages remain absent, highlighting the platform's linguistic stratification. Creators like Kasuku and Chefgodwin occasionally incorporate proverbs or regional dialects, but such instances are rare and rarely trend. From the observations, four themes emerged as discussed below;

Dominance of English and Luganda on TikTok

The study found that English and Luganda are the most commonly used languages on Ugandan TikTok, with approximately 75% of the analyzed videos featuring English or a mix of English and Luganda. The predominance of English–Luganda code-mixing aligns with Ssentanda's (2014, p. 152) findings that social media platforms structurally favor dominant languages due to their wider audience reach and perceived modernity. This dominance reflects broader sociolinguistic trends in which languages associated with education, urbanity, and social mobility are valorized over indigenous tongues. The high prevalence of code-mixing indicates that users strategically navigate between local authenticity and global accessibility, balancing cultural expression with the desire for broader engagement. At the same time, platform algorithms reinforce linguistic hierarchies, as content in widely spoken languages is more likely to gain visibility, likes, and shares, making the marginalization of minority languages not merely a matter of individual choice but one shaped by structural and technological factors. Financial incentives tied to TikTok content creation further intensify this pattern, as organizations such as telecommunication companies, banks, and beauty product companies tend to collaborate with creators who command large audiences. Consequently, creators prioritize English and Luganda because these languages attract more views, sponsorships, and monetization opportunities (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 83).

This economic dynamic reinforces the dominance of English and Luganda while subtly pressuring creators to conform linguistically to maximize visibility and revenue, often at the expense of cultural representation, thereby sidelining indigenous languages within digital spaces and reflecting broader patterns of linguistic commodification.

Code-switching as a Digital Communication Strategy

Code-switching between English and Luganda was a prevalent linguistic practice among Ugandan TikTok users. Many creators strategically alternated between these languages to make their content more engaging and relatable (Nassenstein & Hollington, 2015, p. 203). Beyond engagement, code-switching served sociocultural purposes. Creators content reveals that alternating languages allowed them to negotiate identity—asserting local authenticity (through Luganda) while maintaining global accessibility (through English) (Ssentanda & Nakayiza, 2023, p. 89). This aligns with broader findings on African digital communication, where hybrid language use resists linguistic imperialism while accommodating platform algorithms favoring English (García & Wei, 2014, p. 112). Notably, code-switching patterns varied by genre; for example, challenge videos leaned toward English for wider reach, whereas storytelling favored Luganda for emotional significance. Additionally, code-switching on TikTok functions as a tool for community building, as users who understand both languages can participate in shared humor, memes, and cultural references, reinforcing social cohesion within digital networks. This happens because bilingual users are able to decode layered meanings embedded in mixed-language expressions and respond using the same linguistic style, which signals belonging and mutual cultural knowledge within the community. This linguistic interplay also reflects adaptive creativity, allowing creators to navigate platform constraints such as character limits or algorithmic preferences while retaining cultural specificity. Furthermore, the strategic alternation between languages illustrates how Ugandan TikTok users perform a dual literacy, mastering both local and global linguistic registers to maximize engagement and cultural visibility.

Emergence of Digital Slang and Hybrid Languages

The analysis revealed that TikTok has contributed to the creation of new digital slang, blending Luganda and English into hybrid expressions. Words such as “*kihappeninze nyo*,” translated as “it has happened a lot,” “*kambuzza video*” translated as “share the video” “*sen qu*,” translated as “thank you” “*batabani ba pharaoh*,” translated as “men” are frequently used in captions and comments, reflecting a growing digital dialect unique to Ugandan social media users. Moreover, the prevalence of such

hybrid terms highlights the role of social media as a space for linguistic experimentation, allowing younger generations to assert agency in shaping language norms. Over time, these patterns may influence offline speech, illustrating the porous boundaries between digital and everyday language use, while simultaneously raising concerns about the long-term preservation of standard forms of indigenous languages.

5. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study on TikTok and Language patterns in Uganda have several significant implications for language preservation, digital communication, cultural identity, and policy formulation. As digital platforms continue to influence linguistic practices, understanding their impact is crucial for educators, policymakers, and communities invested in language development and preservation.

The Role of social media in Accelerating Language patterns

This study confirms that TikTok and similar digital platforms are accelerating language patterns in Uganda. The dominance of English and Luganda on TikTok suggests that indigenous languages are at risk of reduced usage in digital spaces. This supports previous studies on social media's role in shaping linguistic preferences (Ssentanda, 2014, p. 152). As digital engagement increases, younger generations may gradually abandon their native languages in favor of those that offer wider communication reach and social capital. Moreover, the prevalence of hybrid language forms and code-switching on TikTok indicates that digital communication is not merely a reflection of existing language hierarchies but an active site where new linguistic norms are constructed. The platform enables rapid dissemination of slang and hybrid expressions, further embedding English and Luganda into everyday digital interactions while subtly marginalizing indigenous tongues. This pattern has implications for cultural continuity, as language is a primary carrier of heritage, values, and identity. Without intentional interventions, such as promoting indigenous language content or incorporating them into popular trends, the digital space may increasingly privilege dominant languages, accelerating the erosion of Uganda's linguistic diversity and reshaping the sociolinguistic landscape for future generations.

Linguistic Inequality in Digital Spaces

The study highlights the digital marginalization of Uganda's indigenous languages, as most TikTok content is created in English and Luganda. This trend reflects broader linguistic inequalities in digital communication, where languages with larger speaker populations dominate, leaving minority languages underrepresented (Garg, 2024, p.

4). Most TikTok videos in Uganda are in Luganda because Luganda functions as a widely understood urban lingua franca, especially in Kampala and other major digital hubs where much online content is produced. Many creators use Luganda to reach the largest possible local audience, as it cuts across ethnic and regional boundaries more effectively than other indigenous languages. In addition, Luganda has long been dominant in popular media such as radio, television, music, and comedy, which influences creators' language choices on digital platforms. TikTok's algorithm further amplifies content that attracts higher engagement, and Luganda-language videos tend to receive more interaction, reinforcing their visibility. As a result, creators often prioritize Luganda for reach and relevance, inadvertently marginalizing less widely spoken indigenous languages in the digital space. If this pattern continues, indigenous languages could become less relevant in the digital era, further weakening their transmission to future generations. This digital marginalization has significant cultural and educational implications, as reduced online presence limits opportunities for younger Ugandans to engage with their native languages in meaningful contexts. It may also diminish the production and circulation of indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and folklore, which are often transmitted through language. Furthermore, the lack of digital representation can affect social identity, leading younger speakers to associate cultural prestige with dominant languages, thereby reinforcing linguistic hierarchies. Over time, these dynamics could contribute to the gradual erosion of linguistic diversity in Uganda, making it imperative to implement strategies that support indigenous language visibility and use in digital spaces.

Digital Code-Switching as a Linguistic Adaptation

The widespread use of code-switching between English and Luganda suggests that Ugandan TikTok users are developing a hybrid digital linguistic identity. This aligns with global trends where social media users mix languages to enhance engagement and relatability (Nassenstein & Hollington, 2015, p. 203). However, while code-switching facilitates communication, it may also contribute to the erosion of linguistic purity in indigenous languages. In addition, this hybrid digital identity reflects a strategic negotiation of social and cultural capital, allowing users to assert local authenticity through Luganda while gaining broader visibility and relevance through English. The pervasive use of code-switching also demonstrates how digital platforms influence language evolution, as younger generations increasingly normalize blended expressions that may diverge from standard forms. Over time, this trend could shift language norms both online and offline, subtly reshaping the ways indigenous languages are spoken, taught, and valued, while raising critical questions

about balancing innovation with cultural and linguistic preservation.

Implications for Language Revitalization Efforts

However, these initiatives struggle to compete with mainstream entertainment content. This finding underscores the need for deliberate strategies to promote indigenous languages in digital spaces, such as creating incentives for content creators who use them. Furthermore, these revitalization efforts highlight the potential of TikTok as a site for cultural preservation, demonstrating that social media can serve not only as a space for entertainment but also for educational and heritage-driven content. When effectively supported, such initiatives can foster intergenerational engagement, allowing younger audiences to connect with their linguistic and cultural roots in interactive ways. However, the limited reach of indigenous language content underscores structural challenges, including algorithmic biases that favor popular languages and the lack of financial incentives for creators.

Policy and Educational Implications

The study's findings imply that policymakers and educators must recognize the growing influence of digital media on language use among Ugandan youth, requiring traditional language preservation efforts to extend beyond offline domains into online platforms. Accordingly, the Ugandan government and language organizations should prioritize developing policies that encourage social media platforms to support indigenous languages through enhanced translation tools, fair content moderation, and reduced algorithmic biases thereby helping sustain linguistic diversity in the digital era. Second, support the inclusion of indigenous languages in digital education resources, ensuring that young users can engage with their native languages online. This can be achieved by developing learning content, apps, and social media materials that intentionally use and normalize indigenous languages in digital spaces. Such inclusion affirms linguistic identity and counters the marginalization of local languages in technology-driven environments. Over time, this approach can strengthen language proficiency, intergenerational transmission, and cultural continuity among digitally active youth. In addition, collaboration between policymakers, educators, and content creators could amplify these efforts, creating a supportive ecosystem for indigenous language use on social media. Incentives such as grants, competitions, or recognition for creators producing content in local languages could motivate wider participation. Furthermore, research and monitoring mechanisms should be established to track the effectiveness of these initiatives, identifying which strategies most successfully increase engagement with indigenous languages. By integrating policy, education, and community action, Uganda can foster a sustainable approach to preserving linguistic diversity in the digital age while

ensuring that online spaces reflect the country's rich cultural heritage.

Cultural Identity

The shift towards a hybrid of English and Luganda on Tiktok implies a potential erosion of Uganda's traditional linguistic heritage, as language serves as a key component of cultural identity (Batibo, 2005, p. 94). This trend among younger Ugandans, who increasingly adopt digital slang and hybrid forms, may weaken their connection to indigenous cultural narratives, ultimately threatening social cohesion and the intergenerational transfer of values, history, and customs that indigenous languages traditionally convey. To mitigate these implications, communities, cultural institutions, educational programs, and initiatives should intentionally promote the use of indigenous languages through digital storytelling, music, interactive content, and technology-integrated teaching—fostering a balance that embraces digital innovation while safeguarding the integrity of Uganda's rich linguistic and cultural heritage.

Economic Considerations in Language Choices

The study revealed that financial incentives play a role in shaping linguistic preferences on TikTok, with content in dominant languages receiving higher engagement and monetization opportunities (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 83). This economic factor further disadvantages indigenous languages, as content creators prioritize languages that attract larger audiences. Language revitalization efforts should explore funding opportunities for content creation in indigenous languages to ensure their continued use in digital media. Additionally, integrating financial support with platform-based visibility measures, such as algorithmic promotion of indigenous language content, could help level the playing field and render the production of such content more viable for creators. Partnerships with cultural organizations, NGOs, and government agencies could provide both funding and technical support, incentivizing creators to produce high-quality content in local languages. Over time, these strategies could foster a sustainable digital ecosystem where indigenous languages not only survive but thrive alongside dominant languages, reinforcing cultural identity while engaging younger audiences in meaningful ways.

6. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that TikTok serves as both a catalyst for linguistic innovation. While the platform has given rise to vibrant hybrid language that enabled new forms of cultural expression, its algorithmic and economic structures

systematically disadvantage indigenous languages, potentially accelerating their digital extinction. The generational divide in language proficiency, compounded by the platform's reward system favoring dominant languages, poses significant challenges to intergenerational knowledge transmission and cultural continuity. However, the documented efforts of some creators to preserve indigenous languages through storytelling and educational content suggest TikTok could be strategically harnessed for revitalization purposes. Moving forward, safeguarding Uganda's linguistic diversity requires coordinated efforts involving platform governance reforms, digital literacy initiatives, and incentivized indigenous language content creation. This research underscores the urgent need for multilingual digital policies that recognize language as both a cultural right and a dynamic social practice in the digital age.

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Sample of videos analyzed

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhd1b2Y/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhdDYdw/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhdkd5m/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhde6SE/>

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhdDsUt/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhdAMQ3/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8rAeP/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhRTqL8/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh888jk/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8xxms/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8pENP/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8mmYh/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8f9aU/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8BXUR/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8magQ/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8Xsrj/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8fHW9/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8CTvE/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8CY2W/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8xX1F/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8xx1w/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8qRF6/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8XBeK/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDh8mC4L/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhfwY9w/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhfVw4f/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhfngbb/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhPPTq9/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhPhTkP/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhPPrvV/>
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDhPjLUH/>