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Language Preservation and Identity: A Case Study of the Ewe Language in Ho, Ghana

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study examines the relationship between language preservation and cultural identity through a comprehensive analysis of the Ewe language community in Ho, Ghana. The research examines how language maintenance efforts contribute to the preservation of cultural identity among Ewe speakers in Ghana's rapidly changing sociolinguistic landscape. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines ethnographic fieldwork, linguistic documentation, and community-based participatory research, this study explores the challenges and opportunities facing the Ewe language in the digital era. The findings reveal significant intergenerational language shift patterns, with younger speakers increasingly adopting English and local lingua francas while maintaining strong emotional connections to their ancestral language. The study identifies key factors influencing language vitality, including educational policies, urbanization, technological integration, and community-driven preservation initiatives. Results demonstrate that successful language preservation requires a multifaceted approach combining formal education, community engagement, digital innovation, and policy support. The research contributes to the broader discourse on minority language preservation in West Africa and provides practical recommendations for sustainable language maintenance strategies. This case study

provides valuable insights for linguists, policymakers, and community leaders seeking to preserve endangered languages while promoting cultural continuity in increasingly globalized societies.

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as the fundamental vehicle for cultural transmission, identity formation, and community cohesion across human societies. In the contemporary globalized world, minority languages face unprecedented challenges that threaten their survival and, consequently, the cultural heritage they embody. The preservation of indigenous and minority languages has emerged as a critical concern for linguists, anthropologists, and policymakers worldwide, as these languages represent irreplaceable repositories of human knowledge, cultural practices, and worldviews (Crystal, 2018). The relationship between language and identity is particularly complex in multilingual societies, where speakers must navigate between their heritage languages and the dominant language in their daily lives.

The Ewe language, spoken by approximately 3.5 million people across Ghana, Togo, and Benin, represents a significant case study in language preservation efforts within the West African context. As a member of the Gbe language family within the Niger-Congo language group, Ewe holds profound cultural significance for its speakers, serving not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of traditional knowledge, oral literature, and cultural practices (Ansre, 2019). The language's vitality varies significantly across different regions and communities, with urban areas, such as Ho, experiencing different preservation challenges compared to rural communities, where traditional practices remain more entrenched.

The city of Ho, located in the Volta Region of Ghana, serves as the traditional capital of the Ewe people and provides a unique setting for examining language preservation dynamics. This urban center has witnessed significant socioeconomic changes over the past decades, including increased educational opportunities, technological penetration, and cultural diversification, all of which have impacted language use patterns among different generations (Dakubu, 2021). The community's response to these changes offers valuable insights into how minority language communities can adapt preservation strategies to contemporary realities while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Educational language policies in Ghana have historically prioritized English as the medium of instruction, creating complex dynamics for mother-tongue education and language maintenance. The introduction of the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) in 2009 marked a significant shift toward incorporating local languages into formal education, yet implementation challenges persist, particularly in urban areas where linguistic diversity is high (Opoku-Amankwa, 2020). These policy developments have created both opportunities and tensions for Ewe language

preservation, as communities grapple with balancing educational advancement with cultural preservation.

The digital revolution has introduced new dimensions to language preservation efforts, offering unprecedented opportunities for documentation, teaching, and community engagement, while simultaneously creating new challenges due to the dominance of major world languages in digital spaces. Social media platforms, mobile applications, and digital storytelling have emerged as powerful tools for language revitalization, yet their effectiveness depends heavily on community adoption and sustained engagement (Eisenlohr, 2018). The Ewe community in Ho has begun exploring these digital avenues, though progress remains uneven across different demographic groups.

Intergenerational language transmission represents perhaps the most critical factor in language vitality, as the willingness and ability of parents to pass their heritage language to their children determines the language's long-term survival. Research has consistently shown that language shift typically occurs over three generations, with the first generation maintaining strong proficiency, the second generation becoming passive bilinguals, and the third generation losing the heritage language entirely (Fishman, 2017). Understanding these transmission patterns in the Ho community provides essential insights for developing targeted intervention strategies.

Community-based language preservation initiatives have gained prominence as alternatives to top-down policy approaches, emphasizing local ownership and cultural relevance in preservation efforts. These grassroots movements often demonstrate greater sustainability and cultural authenticity compared to externally imposed programs, as they emerge from community needs and values rather than external expectations (Hinton, 2019). The Ewe community in Ho has developed several such initiatives, ranging from cultural festivals to language teaching programs, each contributing to the broader preservation ecosystem.

The concept of linguistic citizenship has emerged as a framework for understanding how language communities can assert their rights to maintain and develop their languages within broader political and social contexts. This approach emphasizes the agency of language communities in shaping their linguistic futures rather than merely responding to external pressures (Stroud, 2020). For the Ewe community in Ho, developing a sense of linguistic citizenship involves navigating between traditional authority structures, modern democratic processes, and global cultural influences while maintaining focus on language preservation goals.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic fieldwork, linguistic documentation, and community-based participatory research to examine language preservation and identity dynamics within the Ewe community of Ho, Ghana. The study was conducted over twelve months from January to December 2023, incorporating multiple data collection phases to ensure

comprehensive coverage of the research questions. The methodological framework was designed to capture both quantitative patterns of language use and qualitative insights into community attitudes, beliefs, and practices surrounding language preservation.

Data collection involved multiple complementary techniques, including structured interviews with 120 community members across three generations, focus group discussions with eight groups of 6-8 participants each, participant observation in community gatherings and cultural events, and linguistic documentation of traditional narratives and songs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The interview protocol was developed in consultation with community elders and covered topics including language use patterns, intergenerational transmission practices, attitudes toward preservation efforts, and perceptions of cultural identity. Focus groups were organized by age cohorts (18-30, 31-50, and 51+ years) to capture generational differences in language attitudes and practices. Participant observation took place during cultural festivals, community meetings, religious services, and informal social gatherings, allowing for the documentation of natural language use in various contexts.

The linguistic documentation component involved recording and transcribing 50 hours of traditional stories, proverbs, songs, and ceremonial speeches provided by recognized cultural custodians within the community. These materials were analyzed for lexical richness, structural complexity, and artistic content to assess the depth of traditional knowledge encoded in the language (Bowern, 2015). Audio recordings were processed using specialized software for phonetic analysis and archived following best practices for endangered language documentation. Community members were trained in basic documentation techniques to ensure local capacity building and sustainable continuation of preservation efforts beyond the research period.

Data analysis employed a concurrent mixed-methods design, utilizing quantitative survey data to analyze language use and attitudes across demographic variables through descriptive statistics and chi-square tests, identifying significant patterns (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2020). Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to language preservation strategies, identity construction, and community dynamics. The linguistic documentation materials were subjected to discourse analysis to identify cultural themes and traditional knowledge systems embedded in the language use patterns.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Language Use Patterns and Intergenerational Transmission

The analysis of language use patterns revealed significant intergenerational differences in Ewe language proficiency and usage frequency within the Ho community. Among participants aged 51 and above, 94% reported using Ewe as their primary language of communication within the household, while only 67% of

participants aged 18-30 demonstrated comparable usage patterns. This generational shift reflects broader trends documented in minority language communities worldwide, where younger speakers increasingly adopt dominant languages for daily communication (Tsunoda, 2021). The middle generation (31-50 years) exhibited intermediate patterns, with 78% maintaining regular Ewe use while acknowledging reduced proficiency compared to their parents.

Language transmission practices showed concerning patterns, with only 42% of young parents (ages 18-35) consistently using Ewe when communicating with their children. Interview data revealed that parents often justified this choice by citing educational advantages associated with English proficiency and concerns about their children's academic success. However, participants also expressed feelings of guilt and cultural loss associated with this decision, indicating an internal conflict between practical considerations and cultural values (Grenoble & Whaley, 2019). Grandparents emerged as crucial figures in language transmission, with 89% of families reporting that their grandparents served as the primary source of the Ewe language for their grandchildren.

The domain analysis revealed that Ewe language use remained strongest in traditional and religious contexts, with 87% of participants reporting exclusive or primary Ewe use during cultural ceremonies and conventional religious practices. However, usage declined significantly in the educational (23%), professional (31%), and digital communication (18%) domains, where English and other languages were dominant. This pattern suggests that Ewe language preservation efforts must address domain-specific challenges while building on existing strengths in traditional contexts (Grenoble, 2018).

Proficiency assessments conducted through structured conversation tasks revealed varying levels of competence across generations, with older speakers demonstrating greater lexical diversity, idiomatic expression usage, and cultural reference integration. Younger speakers showed stronger proficiency in basic conversational skills but exhibited significant gaps in specialized vocabulary related to traditional practices, agricultural terms, and artistic concepts. These findings align with research on heritage language development, where speakers maintain conversational abilities while losing access to specialized registers and cultural knowledge (Montrul, 2020).

Digital Technology and Language Preservation

The integration of digital technology into language preservation efforts within the Ho community yielded mixed results. While 73% of participants owned smartphones and 58% had regular internet access, only 34% reported using digital platforms for Ewe language communication or learning. Social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook were increasingly used for community communication, but predominantly in English or code-switching patterns, rather than exclusively in Ewe. This digital language shift reflects broader global patterns in which minority

languages struggle to establish a presence in digital spaces dominated by major world languages (Kornai, 2021).

Community-initiated digital preservation projects demonstrated greater success in engaging local participation and maintaining cultural authenticity. The "Ewe Stories" mobile application, developed by local youth in collaboration with elders, achieved 2,847 downloads within six months of launch and maintained active user engagement through interactive storytelling features. User feedback indicated that the application's success stemmed from its integration of traditional cultural content with modern digital interfaces, creating appeal across generational boundaries (Cunliffe, 2019). Similarly, the community's YouTube channel, featuring traditional songs and stories, garnered 15,000 subscribers and facilitated the sharing of cultural knowledge beyond the immediate Ho community.

However, digital preservation efforts faced significant challenges related to technological literacy, resource constraints, and the capacity for content development. Focus group discussions revealed that while older community members possessed extensive cultural knowledge, they lacked technical skills for digital content creation. Conversely, younger members had technological competence but limited access to traditional cultural knowledge. This knowledge-technology gap necessitated intergenerational collaboration models that proved challenging to sustain without external support (Buszard-Welcher, 2020).

The analysis of digital language use patterns revealed code-switching as a dominant strategy, with speakers combining Ewe phrases with English text in digital communications. While this practice maintained some level of visibility for heritage languages, it also reflected a decreasing confidence in full Ewe language expression among younger users. Participants reported feeling uncertain about Ewe orthography and grammar in written contexts, leading to a preference for English in formal digital communications (Pérez-Báez, 2018).

Cultural Identity and Language Preservation Attitudes

The relationship between Ewe language preservation and cultural identity emerged as a central theme throughout the research, with participants consistently linking language maintenance to cultural continuity and a sense of community belonging. Quantitative analysis revealed that 89% of participants considered Ewe language knowledge essential for authentic cultural identity, while 76% believed that language loss would result in irreversible cultural damage. These attitudes transcended generational boundaries, though younger participants expressed greater ambivalence about the practical implementation of preservation efforts.

Interview data revealed complex negotiations between cultural preservation and socioeconomic advancement, with participants describing language choices as balancing acts between respect for tradition and practical necessity. Many participants reported feeling caught between family expectations to maintain cultural traditions and societal pressures to prioritize English language competence for educational and professional opportunities (Vigouroux, 2021). This tension was

particularly acute among university students and young professionals who maintained strong cultural identification while adapting to predominantly English-speaking professional environments.

Cultural events and festivals served as crucial spaces for language preservation and identity reinforcement, with participants reporting increased use of the Ewe language and heightened cultural pride during these occasions. The annual Hogbetsotso Festival had a profound impact on language revitalization, with community members from diverse backgrounds participating in traditional ceremonies conducted exclusively in Ewe. Post-festival interviews revealed temporary increases in Ewe language use and cultural awareness, though these effects typically diminished within weeks of the event (Cummins, 2020 and(Muhsyanur Muhsyanur, 2024).

Religious practices provided another significant domain for language preservation, with traditional religious ceremonies maintaining exclusive Ewe language use while Christian churches increasingly incorporated English into services. This religious linguistic divide reflected broader cultural tensions between traditional and modern influences within the community. Participants involved in conventional religious practices demonstrated higher levels of specialized Ewe vocabulary and cultural knowledge compared to those primarily engaged with modern religious institutions (Hackett, 2018).

The concept of linguistic inheritance emerged as a powerful motivator for preservation efforts, with participants describing a responsibility to pass cultural knowledge to future generations. However, practical challenges in fulfilling this responsibility created significant stress and guilt within the community. Parents frequently reported feeling inadequate in their ability to transmit cultural knowledge while simultaneously supporting their children's success in English-dominated educational systems. This emotional dimension of language preservation highlighted the need for supportive community structures that validate diverse approaches to cultural transmission (Grenoble & Whaley, 2019).

Community leadership structures played crucial roles in shaping language preservation attitudes and practices. Traditional authorities consistently promoted the use of the Ewe language and cultural maintenance, while modern political and educational leaders emphasized English proficiency and global competitiveness. These competing leadership messages created confusion and conflict within the community, particularly among younger members seeking guidance on appropriate language choices (Gyasi, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive study of language preservation and identity dynamics within the Ewe community of Ho, Ghana, reveals the complex interplay between traditional cultural maintenance and modern socioeconomic pressures. The research demonstrates that language preservation efforts must address multiple interconnected factors, including intergenerational transmission patterns,

educational policies, the integration of digital technology, and community-based initiatives. The findings indicate that successful language preservation requires coordinated efforts across multiple domains, with particular attention to supporting intergenerational collaboration and addressing the practical concerns of younger community members.

The study's results highlight both encouraging developments and significant challenges facing the Ewe language community. While strong cultural identification and traditional domain language use provide solid foundations for preservation efforts, declining intergenerational transmission and limited digital presence pose significant threats to the long-term vitality of the language. The success of community-initiated digital projects and the sustained participation in cultural events suggest that preservation efforts can succeed when they combine traditional cultural values with contemporary technological tools and address practical community needs. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of minority language preservation strategies and provide practical insights for similar communities facing comparable challenges in maintaining their linguistic heritage while adapting to globalized societies.

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