

DOCUMENTATION: A VERITABLE LINGUISTIC TOOL FOR TIV LANGUAGE PRESERVATION

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Abstract

Globalisation and urbanisation are accelerating language shift and eroding linguistic identity, threatening the survival of minority languages such as Tiv. This study examines how systematic documentation can serve as a strategic tool for preserving Tiv. Guided by the Ethno-Linguistic Vitality Theory (Giles, 1970s), it combines primary fieldwork with secondary sources to identify which oral genres are most urgent to record and what obstacles impede the process. Findings indicate that proverbs, oral word games, chants, songs in folktales, and elegies/dirges constitute the core cultural-linguistic assets requiring immediate documentation. Key barriers include limited funding, inadequate technology, dwindling numbers of fluent speakers due to the shift toward dominant codes, and weak institutional support. The study demonstrates that flexible, multimodal documentation—integrating audio, video, and text—can capture these oral genres, thereby safeguarding Tiv linguistic heritage and ensuring its accessibility for future generations.

Keywords: language documentation, Tiv language, preservation, oral tradition, ethno-linguistic vitality.

Introduction

Driven by accelerating language shift and globalisation, Tiv—an indigenous Central-Nigerian language rich in proverbs, children's word games, and folktale songs—faces a steady decline in intergenerational transmission. Earlier scholarship mapped its grammar and orthography, yet the living oral traditions that encode Tiv worldview remain largely undocumented and therefore endangered. Responding to this urgency, the study proposes systematic language documentation as an adaptable preservation mechanism. It aims to demonstrate how carefully curated audio, video, and textual records can serve as a linguistic preservative that safeguards Tiv for future generations. To achieve this, the research will

first identify which core linguistic and cultural elements most merit documentation; second, it will uncover the practical and institutional barriers—financial, technological, and demographic—that currently impede effective documentation; and finally, it will show how documentation, conceived as a flexible variable tool, can be calibrated to Tiv’s phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic features while integrating its performative oral heritage, thereby revitalizing both language and culture.

Literature Review

Language

Language has a big role in life, as humans are social creatures. Inderwati and Hayati (2015) state that “it is believed that human beings and language are deeply connected in the sense that people own a language and use it to interact with others”. From a cultural perspective, Babatunde (2002:1) explicates that language is “the expression of culture, the depository of culture and a crucial mode of culture transmission”. Pinker (1994:17) portrays language as “being so closely woven into human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine human life without language”. Pinker (1994) further opines that “language is a system of communication used by humans ubiquitously and is unquestionably one of the main noticeable and provable differences between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom.

Language Documentation

Framed variously as “documentary linguistics” (Himmelman 1998:21) and the creation of a maximal record for posterity and revitalization (Gippert 2006:145), language documentation is the systematic, comprehensive process of recording, describing and analysing a language—whether through fieldwork or large digital archives such as First Voices and OLAC—to produce corpora ranging from vocabularies and grammars to children’s books and translated texts that underpin both linguistic analysis and the safeguarding of endangered languages (Woodbury 2003:35).

According to the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003), a language that can no longer be maintained, perpetuated, or revitalised still merits the most complete

documentation possible. This is because each language embodies unique cultural and ecological knowledge. It is also because languages are diverse. Documentation of such a language is important for several reasons: 1) it enriches the human intellectual property, 2) it presents a cultural perspective that may be new to our current knowledge, and 3) the process of documentation often helps the language resource person to re-activate the linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Language Preservation

Weber (2022:11) asserts that “language preservation is the preservation of endangered or dead languages; with language death, studies in linguistics, anthropology, prehistory and psychology lose diversity”. Oregonian (2013:232) adds further that “as history is remembered with the help of historic preservation, language preservation maintains dying or dead languages for future studies in such fields”. As a result of this, organisations such as 7000 Languages UNESCO (2007) and the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages document and teach endangered languages as a way of preserving languages. Habsburg (2018:56) opines that “sometimes parts of languages are preserved in museums, such as tablets containing Cuneiform writing from Mesopotamia. Additionally, dictionaries have been published to help keep a record of languages, such as the Kalapuya dictionary published by the Siletz tribe.”

Language preservation refers to a deliberate and systematic effort to protect and maintain a particular language, often one that is endangered or at risk of becoming extinct. It encompasses a range of activities aimed at ensuring the survival and vitality of a language for future generations.

Tiv Language

Wegh (1998:33) notes that the term “Tiv” carries a triple significance: it denotes the ethnic group, their language (Zwa Tiv), and the eponymous ancestral father Tiv himself. The community occupies the undulating savannah of Nigeria’s Middle Belt, a location reiterated by Orban (2005:3) and Akese (2018), who stress that the language—transmitted from the mythic homeland of Swem—functions as a prestigious, culturally embedded code characterised by marked tonality and semantic nuance.

Yina (2011:13) classifies Tiv as a southern Bantoid-Tivoid member of the Benue–Congo branch of Niger–Congo, the largest subgroup within a phylum that spans Nigeria to East Africa. While Abraham (1940:12) rejects the label “semi-Bantu,” insisting on its full Bantu status with Nyanza-like lexis, Adoo (2023:11) observes minimal dialectal fragmentation: the Iharev-Masev, Ukum-Shitile, Kwande and Gboko varieties remain mutually intelligible, with Gboko norms widely regarded as the purest form. Beyond its native speakers, Tiv also serves as a lingua franca among neighbouring Etulo, Jukun, Abakpa and Nyifon communities.

Empirical Review

Cross-linguistics analysis shows that other languages have done some good work on documentation and preservation. Adeyi (2008) examined endangered languages: the case of the Akweya dialect of the Idoma language. The study aimed to ascertain the causes of language endangerment in Akweya and the extent to which Akweya is endangered. The study highlighted that the causes of endangerment in Akweya include parents enforcing prestigious languages on Akweya children, natural disasters, migration, the use of a second language in school, and national policy. Moreso, the findings added that endangered languages can be preserved and reviewed through language documentation and language revitalisation, parents teaching their wards the native language.

Idoko (2024) discussed proverbs as a tool for language preservation and documentation. The study aimed to examine how Idoma proverbs serve as tools for language preservation and documentation. The study used the speech act theory. The study data were collected using two primary and secondary methods. The study found that the type of proverbs used within the Idoma society are proverb that ranges from didactic (moral), worldview, decision and derogation proverbs. Also, the findings added that proverbs play a significant role in preserving the Idoma language. Proverbs can preserve the Idoma language through the following ways: transmitting cultural values, Idoma language usage and constantly teaching. The study concluded that proverbs are an important inheritance, and they play an important function in society, ranging from judicial, entertainment, to religious.

Review of Related Literature

The Tiv language, spoken predominantly in Benue State and surrounding regions of Nigeria, is one of the major minority languages of the Middle Belt. Although it has millions of speakers, its scholarly documentation remains underdeveloped compared to widely studied Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa. Nevertheless, significant contributions have been made across grammar, phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, lexicography, tone studies, and oral literature. This survey organises these works into thematic areas, highlighting both foundational texts and contemporary scholarship.

From Abraham's pioneering descriptive grammar (1933, 1940), which first mapped Tiv phonology, morphology and syntax within a colonial-era anthropological frame, to Armstrong's (1983) influential count of 74 phonemes and Williamson's (1984) orthographic standards, the documentation of Tiv has steadily evolved. Sokpo (2016) revises Armstrong's inventory to 56 phonemes, Ugechi & Ayagah (2021) model syllable structure, while Ishima (2017, 2018) applies X-bar theory and agreement analysis to phrase structure and the numeral system. Dyako (2021) dissects possessive constructions; Adzer (2016, 2019, 2024) offers the first systematic accounts of affixation, morphosyntax and noun inflexion; Aor (2020) classifies reduplication; and Kenen & Yonou (2024) chart tonal prosody. Ayagah and Akpagher (2024) have contributed to the understanding of Tiv phonology and morphology. Sociolinguistic and cultural research by Iorapuu, Gbilekaa and Tar bridges orature, policy and revitalisation, while lexicographic milestones—Karshima's 2013 Tiv–English dictionary, Tsafa, Akpagher & Sokpo (2025) have written on translations, while the NKST Church has done Bible translations and Tiv Language Studies and Development has published Tiv orthography and carried out some workshops to expand the written corpus. Creative works such as Suemo Chia's Adam Wade Kohol Ga and Yina's (2011) semiotic study of oral poetry affirm Tiv's viability as a literary vehicle.

Methodology

Guided by a descriptive research design, the study systematically analyses and documents Tiv linguistic and cultural data for preservation purposes. Using purposive sampling, 30–40 participants were selected for their specialised knowledge: elderly native speakers steeped in oral traditions, language educators, linguists, cultural custodians and community leaders. Data were triangulated through semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions and a review of existing Tiv-language materials, then organised under topical headings that foreground the key domains of documentation and preservation.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Giles, Bourhis & Taylor's (1977) Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT), a sociolinguistic model that explains why some languages endure while others recede. EVT posits that a speech community's survival hinges on three interacting dimensions: (1) status—the prestige and socio-economic value accorded to the language in formal and informal domains; (2) demography—the number, concentration and intergenerational transmission patterns of its speakers; and (3) institutional support—the degree to which the language is represented in education, government, religion and the media. By systematically evaluating these factors for Tiv, the framework reveals both the assets and the pressure points that shape its capacity to withstand the encroachment of dominant languages and cultural forces, thereby guiding targeted preservation strategies.

Data Presentation

Tiv Proverbs

Tiv proverbs condense ancestral wisdom into vivid, memorable lines, guiding moral conduct and social cohesion. Their tonal and metaphorical richness showcases the language's phonological depth and creative lexis. Embedded in everyday speech, they transmit cultural values across generations, reinforcing identity amid external pressures. Documenting these sayings, therefore, safeguards not only words but the worldview that sustains Tiv community life.

Table 1
Examples of some Tiv proverbs

S/N	Tiv Proverbs	English Gloss	Semantic implications
1.	Inyaregh ki a akper	Money Has Wings	This does not mean that money is a bird that flies but pragmatically, this proverb stresses the need to manage and spend money wisely
2.	Inyaregh ki yôôn mve u ki ga; inyaregh ki mimi ka ki seer kpa ki mimi ga ki goo ga	Money does Not announce how it is earned but whereas properly earned money appreciates, improperly earned money depreciates	This proverb warns against the desire to earn riches using foul means in a Tiv society. It extols hard work and moral chasteness as the pinnacles of a successful life.
3.	Ka m or aji anyon cii ve a pulugh ye	Before a bird flies off, I have counted the eggs in its belly	This proverb stresses the planning of a business enterprise before venturing into it
4.	Kon môm ngu waren hiar ga	A Single Tree Cannot Stand the Might of a Strong Wind or Storm	This proverb underscores the relevance of desisting from the wanton cutting down trees in the natural environment.
5.	Doo u yan kwagh shin her	It is better to think of eating Daily than Eating all you have at once	Preservation for rainy days ahead
6.	Kon u uman kpa ngu a iywasen	Dead log too is as useful	Nothing is useless. This proverb highlights the importance of reforestation and afforestation practices as forest recovery strategies

Other Literary Devices

Children's Word Games and Chants

Oral poetry in Tiv thrives through children's play: ring-dances, clapping chants and hide-and-seek songs that encode rhythm, metaphor and communal values while training memory and stamina. Yet these once-spontaneous performances—memorised without writing—are fading as cartoons and online videos replace open-air games. Without systematic audio-visual documentation, the lexical ingenuity, tonal patterns and cultural scripts embedded in these chants risk vanishing with the very breath that carries them. Documentation is important for the preservation of Tiv language and cultural heritage.

Table 2: *Examples of Children's Word Games and Chants*

Tiv	Translation
U yer vee?	Have you hidden?
Ei	No
U yer vee?	Have you hidden?
Ei	No
U yer vee?	Have you hidden?
Eehn	Yes
<i>Tumba Ansha</i>	Tread the beads
<i>Ansha Tôndo</i>	Beads have cut (2x)
<i>Tumba Ansha</i>	Alele little beads
<i>Ansha Tôndo (2x)</i>	The little bead is cut
<i>Alele Ansha</i>	Alele beads
<i>Ansha tôndo</i>	Beads have cut (2x)
<i>M due hen shin</i>	Should i go out
<i>M due heene?</i>	Should I go out?
<i>Bee ya u ter'u wee?</i>	Do you think it is your father's house?

Oral poetry is an integral aspect of the Tiv language as it is part and parcel of the Tiv language and culture. Oral poetry in the language is manifested in various forms such as poems, rhymes and game chants. The above games involve children running around in open and closed places. The game is funny in the sense that even when they are hidden, they are still required to answer, which gives away their presence.

Songs in Tiv Folktales

Tiv folktales, woven around animals like the cunning hare who wagers with a chief, are more than entertainment: they are didactic rituals that instil self-discipline, social cohesion and communal identity. Each narrative is punctuated by moral songs whose tonal richness and proverbial weight encode cultural memory and ethical codes. Once carried solely in living memory, these tales and their melodies are now fading beneath the tide of globalised media and digital distraction. Audio-visual documentation—transcribing words, melody and performance context—can anchor them against technological currents, allowing Tiv stories to circulate alongside, and in dialogue with, English folktales rather than vanish into silence.

Examples of Tiv Folktales:

Tiv:

Igbieke, Igbieke, Igbieke, kur Igbieke
 Kpaa m kpaa Igbieke
 M kpaa anyam iniôndo
 M kua kagher
 Abuku ka iti na
 Mo alôm tor u inyam
 M kpaa ifin-ifu
 Lia liaa Nor kyôr ta hwande a mo
 Kagher kpa ta hwande a mo
 M kaa mer iniu' iniuu

Translation: Igbieke, Igbieke, Igbieke, kur Igbieke

Screwing, sewing, igbieke
 I will use the civet cat's anus
 Also the buffalo's
 Cobra is his names
 I the Hare, king of the animals
 I used to screw like this; ifiu ifiu
 Lia, liaa the elephant has made a bet with me
 The buffalo has made a bet with me
 I say iniu iniuu

Elegies in Tiv

In Tiv funeral poetry—elegies and dirges voiced at gravesides—death is confronted as the final, irreversible severing of earthly ties, yet the songs counsel stoic acceptance rather than despair. Through measured laments that echo communal pain while affirming life's transience, these oral texts encode the Tiv conviction that mortality is an inescapable mystery to be borne with dignity, thereby preserving both linguistic artistry and cultural philosophy for those who remain.

Examples of Tiv elegies and dirges:

Tiv

Ee aho ayooo! *Ee aho ayooo!*
 Or hembe ku ngu hana?
 Aôndo hembra inya i cir ooo!

English

Who is greater than death?
 God is greatest, earth is
 next

Ee aho ayooo! *Ee aho ayooo!*
 Or hembra ku ngu hana!
 Aôndo hembra inya i cir ooo.

Na'm azenga a kuu,
 Aôndo sen kende
 Se ijinga i kuu ve,
 Ayoo-o ku yo u hembra, *Ayooo!*
 Aôndo hembra sha won ve,

ku u wua
 Mbavela wam kela ngu ze oo!

Aôndo hembra inya i cir oo!

(Amase, 2010)

Tiv

Ndiir man mo m keren ye-oo!

Anngbyan wase ndiir,

Shin anyam za kôr a kôr o?
 M pine Baba kpa lu di uma ga

Ngu viing, ken akwati ooo
 Atema viing, kpa ku yô

Ka vande nyôron,

Ior a nyôr cica,
 Ka akuma ku a we yôô,

Saa mnyion iyol ze-oo
 Iyange you kuma-ooo.
 (Amase, 2010)

Who is greater than death!
 God is the greatest; earth
 is next.

Give me batons of death,
 God has dropped us
 A baton of death,
 Death is great
 God is greatest in the
 world;

Death has killed
 My 'Mbavela', she is no
 more
 God is the greatest, earth
 is next ooo.

English

He has disappeared, that's
 why I am searching,
 Our brother has
 disappeared

Or has a tiger caught him?
 I asked father but he's no
 longer alive

He is silent in the casket,
 He is sitting silently, but
 death

Is a matter of who goes
 first;

Everyone must go.
 When death is ready for
 you,

No matter your resistance,
 Your day has come.

Discussion of Findings

The present study identifies critical areas of the Tiv language that require comprehensive documentation for effective preservation. These include oral traditions such as proverbs,

children's word game chants, songs in folktales, elegies, and dirges. This focus complements and extends prior research that has predominantly concentrated on the more structural components of Tiv, including orthography, phonology, morphology, syntax, and tone.

Historically, the foundational works of Malherbe (1931) and Abraham (1933) laid the groundwork for understanding Tiv grammar and tone, with Malherbe pioneering orthographic transcription and Abraham emphasising the central role of tone in grammatical structure. These early efforts, augmented by orthographic standardisations such as the 1979 Benue State Government review and recent contributions from Kpamor J.T. Okar and the National Language Centre, have ensured the language's written form is continually refined. Furthermore, scholars like Arnott (date) enriched the grammatical analysis, particularly in verbal classification, while more recent linguists, including Adzer (2024), Ayagah & Akpagher (2024), Ishima (2022), Sokpo (2016), Ugechi (2022), and Yina (2013), have further expanded scholarly understanding across multiple linguistic domains.

Despite these extensive studies on Tiv's structural linguistic features, the present findings underscore a notable lacuna: the under-documentation of oral and cultural linguistic expressions. This observation aligns with previous assertions that while grammatical and phonological aspects have been systematically recorded, oral traditions remain less explored. For instance, whereas Malherbe and Abraham's works concentrated on written and tonal grammar, they did not extensively cover oral forms like proverbs or folktale songs. Contemporary scholars, while advancing the core linguistic knowledge, similarly have yet to engage deeply with these oral cultural genres.

The challenges highlighted in the current study—limited financial resources, technology, declining fluent speakers due to language shift, and insufficient institutional support also resonate with broader sociolinguistic concerns raised in language preservation literature. These barriers impede not only documentation efforts but also intergenerational language transmission, further endangering the survival of less-studied linguistic elements like oral chants and proverbs.

In comparison, the present study's methodological emphasis on multi-modal documentation (audio, video, and text) of oral

traditions introduces a more holistic approach than previous work, which largely focused on textual and phonological data. This inclusive approach addresses the cultural essence embedded in oral forms, reinforcing the view that language documentation must encompass both linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions to be truly effective.

The present findings both complement and extend the existing body of Tiv language research. While previous studies have provided indispensable linguistic frameworks, this study fills a crucial gap by foregrounding the importance of oral traditions in Tiv language documentation. By doing so, it offers a more comprehensive preservation strategy that integrates linguistic structure with cultural practice, vital for the sustainable survival of the Tiv language in an increasingly globalised and linguistically competitive environment.

Recommendations

There are strategies for effective documentation and preservation. Some of such strategies include community involvement, educational integration, and digital archiving.

- a). Community involvement is essential for capturing authentic linguistic and cultural data. Working with native speakers, elders, and cultural custodians helps linguists document language use in its natural context, ensuring a rich and accurate resource. Elders contribute valuable knowledge of proverbs, stories, and oral traditions that reflect Tiv cultural values.
- b). In terms of educational integration, introducing the Tiv language into school curricula can promote its use and preservation among younger generations. Language classes, literacy programmes, and storytelling sessions in schools reinforce Tiv's relevance and provide a platform for children to learn and practice the language. Educational materials such as textbooks, digital media, and interactive tools can further enhance learning.
- c). Digital archiving is relevant in that digital archiving enables the preservation of Tiv language resources in an accessible and enduring format. Audio recordings, video documentation, online dictionaries, and cultural databases provide resources for both linguistic and cultural learning. Creating online platforms that

catalogue and preserve these materials allows a broader audience, including diaspora communities, to access and connect with Tiv.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of comprehensive documentation in preserving the Tiv language. The study emphasises its role in safeguarding both linguistic and cultural heritage. With language shift and a declining number of speakers posing significant threats, documenting certain aspects of Tiv is crucial for its continuity. The findings indicate that the essential aspects of the Tiv language that should be documented include its proverbs, oral word games, chants, songs in folktales and elegies and dirges in Tiv. The documentation of these oral features will ensure a balanced record of both linguistic and cultural elements unique to Tiv.

Moreso, the key challenges in documentation and preservation of the Tiv language include limited financial resources and technology, a declining number of fluent speakers due to language shift toward dominant languages like English, and insufficient institutional support for including Tiv in formal education and media. The findings added that language documentation serves as a flexible tool by adapting to various oral linguistic elements such as Tiv proverbs, songs in folktales, riddles, elegy and dirges and recording them in forms like audio, video, and text through this way, Tiv oral aspects and culture will be documented thus, ensuring the language's survival and accessibility for future generations.

Contribution to Linguistic Knowledge

From a Tiv language documentation and preservation perspective, this study contributes to linguistic knowledge in the following ways: the study provides insights into language endangerment and revitalisation: The study provides valuable data on the factors contributing to language endangerment in Tiv communities, offering insights into how similar factors may affect other indigenous languages and suggesting tailored strategies for language revitalisation.

Furthermore, the study also strengthens sociolinguistic theory particularly the ethnolinguistic vitality theory. The application of ethnolinguistic vitality theory to Tiv highlights

the practical value of sociolinguistic models in language preservation, demonstrating how factors like community identity and institutional support can impact language sustainability.

Also, by documenting cultural expressions, proverbs, and oral traditions in Tiv, the study preserves valuable cultural heritage, adding to the global effort to maintain linguistic diversity and promoting cross-cultural understanding through language preservation.

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