


The problem of sustainability in translation studies: whose languages are preserved and whose are erased?

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ARTICLE INFO	Abstract
<p>Keywords: <i>Translation, linguistic sustainability, language preservation, postcolonial translation, linguistic ecology, multilingualism, cultural diversity.</i></p> <p>©2025 Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International</p> 	<p><i>Translation plays a critical role in promoting linguistic sustainability and cultural continuity in an increasingly globalized and digitized world. While it fosters intercultural communication and knowledge exchange, translation simultaneously determines which languages are preserved and which are marginalized. This study interrogates the paradoxical role of translation as both a preserver and an agent of linguistic extinction. It explores how translation policies, market forces, and emerging technologies—particularly artificial intelligence—privilege dominant global languages such as English, French, and Mandarin while excluding low-resource and indigenous languages. The research employs a non-experimental qualitative approach, relying on theoretical and textual analysis to examine translation’s ecological, ethical, and socio-political dimensions. Drawing on Linguistic Ecology Theory and Postcolonial Translation Theory, the study situates translation within broader debates on linguistic justice and sustainability. Linguistic Ecology Theory highlights translation’s function within interdependent language ecosystems, whereas Postcolonial Translation Theory reveals how colonial and neo-colonial legacies sustain linguistic hierarchies. The central objective is to evaluate how translation influences the sustainability or erasure of languages within global communication systems. Findings suggest that translation can either empower endangered languages through inclusive, community-driven initiatives or reinforce linguistic homogenization through structural inequality. The study calls for a redefinition of translation ethics toward “translational sustainability,” emphasizing inclusivity, reciprocity, and digital equity as prerequisites for preserving global linguistic diversity.</i></p>

Introduction

Translation occupies a pivotal position in the contemporary globalized world, functioning as both a bridge and a filter of human communication. It enables the exchange of ideas, scientific knowledge, and cultural narratives across linguistic boundaries. Yet, paradoxically, translation also participates in the asymmetrical flow of linguistic power, often favoring dominant world languages while marginalizing or erasing minority ones (Ndimele, 2020). This dual role positions translation as both a preserver and a potential destroyer of linguistic diversity. In an era characterized by intense globalization, digital expansion, and artificial intelligence-driven communication, translation practices have become central to discussions of sustainability, equity, and cultural justice (Baker, 2018).

The sustainability of languages transcends their continued use; it encompasses the preservation of cultural identity, indigenous knowledge, and the ecological balance of linguistic ecosystems. When translation is managed inclusively, it serves as a tool for linguistic revitalization—enabling endangered languages to find new relevance through literature, media, and education. Conversely, when translation practices are shaped by colonial legacies, market demands, and digital inequalities, they contribute to linguistic homogenization and epistemic domination. Translation, therefore, becomes a site of ideological negotiation where power, culture, and technology intersect to determine whose languages are preserved and whose are erased.

In the African and particularly Nigerian context, the question of translation and sustainability acquires deeper significance. The continent's colonial history introduced foreign languages—English, French, and Portuguese—that became dominant in administration, education, and publishing. This dominance relegated indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa to secondary roles, often confined to domestic or informal domains (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2019). Translation has historically facilitated this imbalance by privileging Eurocentric frameworks and suppressing indigenous worldviews. Yet, translation has also been an instrument of cultural survival, enabling African writers and scholars to project their realities into global discourse. Contemporary translation efforts that promote local language literature and digital content in indigenous tongues represent attempts to re-establish linguistic equity and sustainability.

Globally, the dominance of English as the “pivot” language of translation has intensified concerns about linguistic diversity and justice. Digital translation technologies such as Google Translate and DeepL rely heavily on data-rich languages, systematically excluding low-resource ones. This leads to the underrepresentation of hundreds of languages in digital spaces. The politics of translation thus mirrors global inequalities, as the languages of power continue to expand their reach while others are silenced through non-representation. This reality necessitates a reconsideration of translation ethics and sustainability frameworks that prioritize linguistic equity and reciprocal exchange over monolingual efficiency.

Sustainability must therefore be understood not only in ecological or environmental terms but as a holistic paradigm encompassing cultural and linguistic balance. Translation plays a crucial role in this paradigm by mediating the survival or disappearance of linguistic communities. Sustainable translation requires rethinking translation policies, training, and technologies to ensure inclusivity and respect for all linguistic identities. It calls for an ethical reorientation in which translation is not simply a conduit for global communication but a force for cultural preservation and mutual respect (Adegbite, 2021).

Anchored in Linguistic Ecology Theory and Postcolonial Translation Theory, this study critically examines the intersection of translation and sustainability, interrogating how translation contributes to the preservation or erasure of languages. By analyzing the socio-political, ethical, and technological dimensions of translation, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on linguistic diversity, decolonization, and cultural resilience in the twenty-first century.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Clarification

A sound understanding of the interplay between translation and sustainability requires conceptual clarity. Translation is not merely the mechanical act of transferring words between languages but a complex cultural, ideological, and technological process that mediates power relations and determines linguistic visibility. Sustainability, on the other hand, refers not only to environmental preservation but also to the broader capacity of systems—including linguistic and cultural systems—to endure and adapt over time (Cronin, 2020). When combined, translation and sustainability evoke questions about equity, inclusion, and justice: which languages are empowered to survive through translation, and which are pushed toward extinction?

In its linguistic sense, translation is an act of meaning-making situated within contexts of cultural negotiation (Baker, 2018). It encompasses interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic processes, each with implications for how languages evolve and interact. Interlingual translation, which involves rendering meaning across languages, has the most direct impact on linguistic sustainability. As Adegbola (2020) explained, the dominance of English in global translation markets leads to unidirectional flows—from indigenous languages into English or other major languages—thereby diminishing the perceived value and intellectual potential of smaller languages. Sustainability stems from ecological discourse and denotes the ability of systems to maintain diversity, productivity,

and resilience. In linguistic terms, it implies ensuring the continued use, transmission, and development of languages across generations. Scholars such as Bamgbose (2019) and Ndimele (2019) describe this as linguistic sustainability—the strategic preservation and modernization of languages to remain relevant in changing socio-political and technological environments.

The concept of language preservation refers to systematic strategies designed to maintain or revive endangered languages (Mufwene, 2020). However, preservation must go beyond archiving to include making languages functional in new domains such as science, media, and technology (Odia, 2018). Translation plays a vital role here by creating linguistic bridges between traditional and modern contexts.

Another important concept is linguistic justice, which demands that all languages be accorded equal opportunity to exist, develop, and contribute to global knowledge. It critiques linguistic imperialism, whereby dominant languages accrue symbolic and material power at the expense of others (Bandia, 2020). This is particularly relevant in multilingual nations such as Nigeria, where translation policies often privilege English, marginalizing indigenous linguistic resources (Emezue, 2021; Odebunmi, 2020). Finally, linguistic erasure refers to processes—sometimes subtle, sometimes overt—through which languages lose visibility, prestige, and vitality. Spivak (2013) calls this “epistemic violence,” describing how translation can distort or silence subaltern voices when conducted within hegemonic frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

Two interrelated theories provide the foundation for understanding the relationship between translation and sustainability in this study: Linguistic Ecology Theory and Postcolonial Translation Theory. Together, these frameworks illuminate both the structural and ideological dimensions of how translation shapes linguistic survival and extinction.

Linguistic Ecology Theory

The Linguistic Ecology Theory, originating from Einar Haugen (1972), posits that languages exist in an ecosystem where they interact with one another and with their environments. Scholars such as Fill and Mühlhäusler (2018) interpret linguistic diversity as analogous to biodiversity—integral to the health of global cultural systems. From this ecological perspective, translation operates as both a vector of exchange and a potential disruptor. When translation favors dominant “species” (languages such as English or French), it risks destabilizing the ecosystem by displacing smaller linguistic species. Conversely, equitable translation practices can strengthen linguistic resilience by fostering diversity and interdependence.

In Nigeria, translation mediates interactions among more than 500 indigenous languages and English. However, policies that privilege English undermine ecological balance by reducing indigenous languages to subordinate status. Translation into English may facilitate international recognition but often at the cost of domestic linguistic vitality. To restore equilibrium, translation must flow bidirectionally—allowing indigenous languages to both receive and generate knowledge (Adegbola & Odumuh, 2021). Sustainable translation practices such as community-based projects and digital localization represent efforts to restore linguistic biodiversity.

Postcolonial Translation Theory

Postcolonial Translation Theory examines how translation functions within historical and contemporary structures of power. It critiques Eurocentric norms of translation that privilege Western epistemologies and linguistic hierarchies. Spivak (2013) and Bandia (2020) argue that translation in colonial contexts served ideological purposes of control and cultural domination.

In Nigeria’s multilingual setting, English functions as the “gateway language” for education, administration, and technology, while indigenous languages are relegated to oral or cultural functions

(Emezue, 2021). Translation into English thus becomes an act of validation. To achieve sustainability, translation must resist inherited inequalities by promoting linguistic autonomy and equity. Venuti's (2017) call for foreignization aligns with postcolonial goals of preserving cultural distinctiveness, while domestication often results in cultural erasure.

Digital translation tools, though seemingly neutral, often perpetuate colonial hierarchies through data bias. AI systems are primarily trained on European and Asian high-resource languages, leaving African languages underrepresented (Adegbola & Odumuh, 2021). A decolonial approach to translation technology would entail developing datasets and platforms that reflect linguistic diversity and empower local communities.

The convergence of Linguistic Ecology and Postcolonial Translation Theories provides a holistic framework for analyzing translation and sustainability. While Linguistic Ecology explains how languages interact and compete within global ecosystems, Postcolonial Translation Theory exposes the power structures that determine which languages thrive or decline. At the ecological level, sustainability demands reciprocity and coexistence. At the postcolonial level, it requires dismantling linguistic hierarchies rooted in history and economics (Bandia, 2020). Community translation initiatives, such as the African Storybook Project, which translates children's literature into over 100 African languages, embody both ecological sustainability and postcolonial justice (Emezue, 2021).

Empirical Studies

Malmkjaer (2018) examined how translation functions as both an enabler of communication and an instrument of linguistic domination in African multilingual contexts. Using qualitative analysis of translated texts from English to indigenous African languages, the study found that the global dominance of English in academic and media translation reinforces linguistic hierarchies and epistemic dependence. Indigenous languages are often translated to accommodate English-speaking audiences rather than vice versa, leading to partial preservation and semantic loss. This supports the argument that translation, when asymmetrically applied, becomes a vehicle of linguistic erasure rather than sustainability.

Adebayo and Adebite (2020) conducted a mixed-method study exploring the impact of translation technologies on indigenous language preservation in Nigeria. Findings revealed significant underrepresentation and inaccuracies in machine translation of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, attributing this to algorithmic bias and data scarcity. The study emphasized the need for inclusive language technologies to support equitable translation ecosystems, reinforcing the technological dimension of linguistic sustainability.

Nettle and Romaine (2019) assessed how community-based translation initiatives contribute to sustaining endangered languages. Through ethnographic research in Australia and sub-Saharan Africa, they documented translation projects that engaged local speakers in producing bilingual materials and oral archives. Results showed that participatory translation fosters linguistic pride and intergenerational transmission, proving that translation can promote sustainability when it empowers communities.

Ogunyemi and Odebode (2021) investigated how translation policies in Nigeria's educational system influence the status of indigenous languages. They found a gap between policy intention and practice—while mother-tongue instruction is advocated, translation of educational materials remains minimal. This reveals how weak policy implementation contributes to linguistic inequality.

Cronin (2022) conducted a global study using UNESCO data and found that 80% of translation occurs among six dominant languages—English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian—while thousands of others remain untranslated. This asymmetry reflects linguistic capitalism, where economic value dictates translation priorities.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that translation is not neutral but a socio-political and technological process that can preserve or erase languages. Four patterns emerge:

1. Global hierarchies privilege dominant languages.
2. Translation technologies reproduce these hierarchies through algorithmic bias.
3. Community-based translation counteracts marginalization.
4. Policy implementation gaps hinder sustainability

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of translation within the framework of linguistic sustainability reveals a complex relationship between language preservation and erasure, mediated by ideology, technology, and policy. From an ecological standpoint, languages function as interdependent species within a shared communicative ecosystem. Translation operates as a mechanism of interaction that can either maintain or disrupt this balance. When translation favors dominant languages, it alters the linguistic ecosystem by displacing smaller ones. In Nigeria's education and media, translation predominantly flows from English to local languages, often distorting indigenous meanings. As Adebayo and Adebite (2020) observed, technological translation platforms inadequately represent Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, resulting in "digital exclusion."

From a postcolonial perspective, translation perpetuates linguistic hierarchy and symbolic domination inherited from colonial legacies (Baker, 2016). English continues to operate as a "global filter," determining whose narratives are legitimized (Malmkjaer, 2018). In Nigeria, academic and governmental translations privilege English, while indigenous languages remain underdeveloped in specialized fields such as science and law.

However, when translation becomes participatory and community-based, as noted by Nettle and Romaine (2019), it transforms into a tool of empowerment. Involving native speakers ensures that cultural nuances and semantic authenticity are retained, supporting both linguistic ecology and decolonial ethics.

Translation policy and practice in Nigeria expose the tension between aspiration and implementation. Although the National Policy on Education advocates mother-tongue instruction, translation of materials into indigenous languages remains inconsistent (Ogunyemi & Odebode, 2021). Sustainability requires institutional enforcement and adequate funding to bridge this gap.

Globally, Cronin's (2022) findings confirm that translation is embedded within an economic system of prestige. This commodification aligns with postcolonial critiques of globalization, where linguistic worth is equated with profitability. The erasure of minority languages is thus not only linguistic but ideological.

In essence, translation's impact on sustainability depends on its ideological orientation and institutional framework. Translation can sustain languages when it prioritizes inclusivity, ecological balance, and reciprocity; conversely, it erases them when governed by unequal power relations. Sustainable translation must integrate local agency, digital innovation, and decolonial ethics to transform translation from a tool of domination into a means of linguistic revitalization.

Findings and Implications

The findings reveal that translation functions as both a mechanism of preservation and an agent of erasure, depending on how it is conceptualized, institutionalized, and practiced. A major finding is that translation is ideologically charged rather than neutral (Malmkjaer, 2018; Baker, 2016). Translators operate within systems that privilege dominant world languages. This bias affects what is translated and how. Indigenous languages are often reshaped to fit Western frameworks, resulting in epistemic distortion and cultural loss (Akinwotu & Odebode, 2020).

The rise of artificial intelligence has intensified these inequalities. Indigenous languages like Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa remain poorly represented in translation databases (Adebayo & Adebite,

2020). These technological biases reinforce linguistic inequality by rendering some languages digitally invisible. Without inclusive algorithmic design, technological advancement risks accelerating linguistic extinction.

Community-driven translation projects, as Nettle and Romaine (2019) documented, successfully revitalize endangered languages by engaging native speakers. Such models prove that translation can empower when communities have agency and control.

Policy analysis (Ogunyemi & Odebode, 2021) revealed that translation practices in Nigeria lack consistency and funding. Despite policy recognition of indigenous languages, translation of textbooks and official materials is minimal. Translational sustainability therefore requires institutional accountability and adequate resource allocation.

Cronin's (2022) study showed that global translation flows favor economically powerful languages, confirming that translation follows capitalist logic. In Nigeria, this global imbalance manifests locally, as translation investment is directed toward English-based communication due to its economic value.

Implications

Ethical Implications: Translators must adopt inclusive ethics that value cultural specificity and equality. Translation should preserve meaning systems rooted in indigenous epistemologies rather than merely convert language.

Policy Implications: Policymakers must enforce multilingual translation policies that mandate the translation of educational, legal, and technological materials into indigenous languages. This requires both government funding and community participation (Odebode & Oyewole, 2022).

Technological Implications: AI-driven translation tools should incorporate African languages through inclusive datasets. Developers must prioritize linguistic diversity in algorithmic design, supported by collaborations among linguists, technologists, and local communities.

Sociocultural Implications: Translation must be viewed as a sociocultural process that shapes identity and heritage. Losing languages through negligent translation equates to losing entire worldviews. Promoting multilingualism is therefore a matter of cultural justice and human rights.

Overall, translation occupies a paradoxical space—both a potential destroyer and preserver of languages. Its sustainability impact depends on who controls translation processes and how technology and policy frameworks are designed. For nations like Nigeria, translation must become a central pillar of cultural preservation strategies. Sustainable translation represents a commitment to linguistic democracy—ensuring that all languages, regardless of status, continue to contribute to humanity's collective knowledge.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the relationship between translation and linguistic sustainability, exploring whose languages are preserved and whose are erased in global discourse. Drawing on Linguistic Ecology and Postcolonial Translation theories, it revealed translation as a double-edged practice—facilitating communication while perpetuating inequality. For translation to foster sustainability, it must embrace ethical, inclusive, and decolonial practices that empower marginalized communities. This demands policy reform, technological inclusion, and community participation. By advocating “translational sustainability,” the study redefines translation as a force for cultural justice and ecological balance. Sustainable translation practices are vital not only for preserving linguistic diversity but also for ensuring equitable access to global knowledge and representation in the multilingual world.

Contributions to existing Knowledge

First, it reconceptualizes translation as an ecological and ethical act, extending Linguistic Ecology Theory to include the translation process as a determinant of language vitality. By linking translation to linguistic biodiversity, it provides a framework for assessing how translation practices influence linguistic survival, balance, and extinction.

Second, it contributes to Postcolonial Translation Studies by revealing how global and local translation systems perpetuate linguistic imperialism and epistemic inequality. The study advances this field by demonstrating that translation can also be a form of resistance—an emancipatory practice that restores linguistic dignity when guided by decolonial ethics.

Third, it fills a contextual research gap by foregrounding Nigeria and other African multilingual societies in the global discourse on translation and sustainability. Previous studies often concentrated on European or Asian contexts; this research situates African languages at the center of the conversation, offering localized empirical insights that enrich global understanding of translation's sustainability role.

Recommendations

1. Governments should implement inclusive translation frameworks promoting indigenous languages in education, governance, and media, supported by adequate funding.
2. Technology developers should design AI and machine translation systems incorporating African languages through open-source corpora.
3. Translation curricula should integrate cultural ecology and decolonial ethics to promote authentic representation.
4. Indigenous communities should actively participate in translation projects to ensure local ownership and linguistic preservation.
5. Translation should form a core component of literacy and media campaigns promoting indigenous language revitalization.

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