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# Introduction to the Special Issue 'African Languages in the Digital Age'

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Sizwe Zwelakhe Dlamini 

Guest Editor

Department of African Languages

University of Johannesburg 

Johannesburg, South Africa

sizwed@uj.ac.za

## Introduction

The rapid pace of digital expansion across Africa has sparked important questions about the future of African indigenous languages. These questions serve as an entry point for deeper reflection, critical inquiry, and strategic thinking about the role these languages should play in public life, education, knowledge production, and technological innovation. Despite being central to the cultural identities and everyday practices of millions of speakers across the continent, African indigenous languages remain at a margin in the digital epoch. Nonetheless, viewed positively, this epoch has a strong potential of gradually opening new spaces in which these languages can be used, developed, refined, revitalised, and preserved. This special issue titled, "African Languages in the Digital Age", is an attempt to discuss how digital technologies are transforming indigenous African languages ecologies, and how these languages provide platform for the digital landscape to be challenged and reshaped. It brings together interdisciplinary scholarship that critically investigates the link between language, technology, and issues of participation, transformation, use, and access. The issue covers peer-reviewed articles that touch on the following themes:

- The incorporation of African indigenous languages to improve ICT comprehension, access and uptake by African populations;
- The incorporation of African indigenous languages in ICT development and use in human activity such as in education, e-government, e-commerce, and banking system;
- The possibilities, benefits, and challenges of Artificial intelligence (AI) in teaching and learning.
- The linguistic complexities and challenges between African indigenous languages and ICTs, and possible solutions;
- The relationship between African indigenous languages, ICS access, and equitable access to digital economic opportunities and access to basic services.

Collectively, the contributions in this issue highlight several important factors. Firstly, they raise questions about the state of language technologies in enabling digital participation, equitable access, and linguistic equity, while revealing inherent political and methodological challenges in the development of tools for under-resourced languages. Secondly, they highlight the socio-linguistic aspect of digital spaces, demonstrating how online platforms

can become the centre of activism and multilingualism. They evaluate the value of artificial intelligence and online platforms in reimagining practices like teaching and learning and service delivery, for instance. Thirdly, the contributions in this issue raise policy and planning questions, scrutinising how states, institutions, and communities can aid and contribute to the development and digital integration of African indigenous languages, in ways that promote inclusivity and sustainability.

By foregrounding multi-disciplinary perspectives, such as sociology, political science, anthropology, public management and governance, education, translation studies, and computational linguistics, this special issue attempts to demonstrate that overall, the digital age poses both challenging and transformative possibilities for African indigenous languages. More importantly, it demonstrates the significance of African scholars and communities in shaping the multilingual digital future. Through this issue, the aim is not only to document current research trends and developments, but also to inspire more research, potential collaborations, and policy intervention strategies that position and uphold African indigenous languages at the centre of the continent's digital transformation. There is still a lot that needs to be done to address the issue of the underrepresentation of African indigenous language in digital spaces, but there is hope because of the work that has already begun in the continent. As the common isiZulu idiomatic expression avers, "Inja iyawaqeda amanzi ngolimi" (The dog finishes water by licking).