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Influence of Digital Language Movements on National Language Policy: Perspectives from Activists and Policymakers

Tinamary Chidiebere Omulu
Department of Modern European Languages
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
tc.omulu@unizik.edu.ng

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Chukwuyem Henry F. Iwelu
Primary Education
Federal College of Education (Technical) Asaba
drchfiwelu2020@gmail.com

Abstract

Digital language movements' grassroots initiatives that use online platforms to advocate for linguistic recognition, orthographic standardization, and minority language visibility are increasingly shaping the landscape of national language policy. While scholarship in language planning has often emphasized state-driven processes, the influence of digitally mediated activism on policy design and implementation remains underexamined. This article investigates how such movements interact with national policy frameworks by analyzing perspectives from activists and policymakers. Drawing on campaign archives, policy documents, and semi-structured interviews, the study shows that digital initiatives operate through three main strategies: setting policy agendas via social media visibility, producing corpus resources such as lexicons and orthographies, and mobilizing pressure through transnational advocacy. Policymakers, however, perceive these initiatives ambivalently acknowledging their symbolic and cultural value while questioning their representativeness and practical feasibility. The findings highlight three key dynamics: digital activism is most effective in shaping early agenda-setting; activist-generated resources gain traction when validated by

institutional allies; and structural policy adoption depends on bridging the digital divide and aligning with bureaucratic priorities. By foregrounding both tensions and collaborations between grassroots linguistic citizenship and institutional policy-making, the study advances understanding of how digital platforms reconfigure language planning in the twenty-first century and offers implications for more inclusive and sustainable policy design.

Keywords: Digital Activism; Language Policy; Language Planning; Linguistic Citizenship; National Policy

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a surge in digital language movements' grassroots initiatives that employ online platforms to advocate for the recognition, revitalization, and promotion of minority languages. These movements often leverage social media campaigns, open-source repositories, online petitions, and collaborative digital corpora to challenge traditional state-centered approaches to language planning. Recent scholarship underscores that digital platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for linguistic communities to engage directly in agenda-setting, resource creation, and policy advocacy (Deumert 2020; Klemenčič and Furlan 2021). In this way, language activism has been transformed from sporadic community lobbying to a more visible, transnational, and digitally coordinated force.

Despite these shifts, national language policy remains largely anchored in top-down frameworks, often guided by political, economic, or ideological considerations rather than community-driven digital interventions. Research shows that language policy tends to lag behind grassroots innovations, creating a gap between citizen-led demands and institutional adoption (McCarty 2021). Digital language movements attempt to bridge this gap by amplifying marginalized voices, producing linguistic resources such as orthographic standards and terminological databases, and

mobilizing international attention through hashtags and viral campaigns. Nevertheless, the extent to which these efforts influence concrete policy outcomes is still underexplored in contemporary language planning scholarship.

Digital platforms accelerate language change and innovation. Social media environments encourage the rapid creation of neologisms, abbreviations, and hybrid linguistic forms. According to Solange Swiri Tumasang, digital communication fosters the emergence of new lexical items that influence everyday communication, particularly among young users (Tumasang). These innovations often blur the boundaries between formal and informal registers, reflecting what Patricia Friedrich and Eduardo Diniz de Figueiredo describe as the transformation of sociolinguistic practices in the digital age (Friedrich and Figueiredo). Thus, digital language movements demonstrate that linguistic evolution is increasingly user-driven and technologically mediated.

Another critical dimension is translingualism and identity construction online. Digital spaces enable users to mix languages, codes, and styles in ways that reflect complex identities. Sender Dovchin argues that social media facilitates "translingual Englishes," where multilingual speakers creatively negotiate authenticity and belonging (Dovchin). This highlights how digital language movements are not merely about communication but also about identity performance and cultural expression, especially among youth and diasporic communities.

Digital language movements are also closely tied to activism and social justice. Language plays a central role in shaping online political engagement, where hashtags, slogans, and discourse strategies influence public perception. Chandreie Mukherjee and Rama N. H. Alapati show that strategic language use in online campaigns significantly affects visibility and participation

(Mukherjee and Alapati). Similarly, Helen Sauntson et al. emphasize that linguistic practices can both reinforce and challenge social inequalities, positioning language as a tool for activism and resistance (Sauntson et al.). These perspectives reveal that digital language movements are deeply embedded in power dynamics and ideological struggles.

Furthermore, digital technologies have enabled language revitalization and preservation efforts, particularly for marginalized and endangered languages. Oliver Mayeux's study of the Louisiana Creole Virtual Classroom demonstrates how online communities can create new speakers and sustain linguistic practices through collaborative learning (Mayeux). Such initiatives align with broader forms of digital language activism, where communities use technology to reclaim linguistic heritage and resist cultural erasure (Lillehaugen and Chávez Santiago). This underscores the role of digital platforms as spaces for linguistic empowerment and cultural continuity.

Finally, digital language movements raise concerns about linguistic inequality and hegemony. The dominance of global languages, especially English, can marginalize local languages in digital spaces. Rowland-Onyekachi Loveth and Emmanuel Igwenagu argue that digital media often reproduce linguistic hierarchies, leading to audience fragmentation and cultural tension (Loveth and Igwenagu). At the same time, scholars like Rita Raley highlight how digital media can also function as "tactical" tools for resisting dominant discourses and promoting alternative voices (Raley). This duality reflects the tension between globalization and linguistic diversity in the digital era.

A key tension lies in the relationship between activists and policymakers. Activists view digital platforms as spaces for linguistic citizenship, enabling communities to articulate claims for recognition and legitimacy (Stroud and Kerfoot 2020).

Policymakers, however, often perceive online activism with caution, questioning its credibility, representativeness, and practical feasibility. For instance, government officials may acknowledge the symbolic importance of digital movements while resisting structural changes due to budgetary, institutional, or political constraints (Ndhlovu and Makalela 2021). These divergent perspectives underscore the importance of analyzing not only the strategies employed by activists but also the ways policymakers interpret and respond to such initiatives.

The problematic that guides this study is rooted in the asymmetry between the rapid evolution of digital language activism and the slower, more bureaucratic processes of national language policymaking. Whereas digital campaigns can mobilize visibility overnight, policy adoption often requires extensive negotiation, expert consultation, and legislative approval. This discrepancy raises critical questions about whether, and how, digital activism actually reshapes the trajectory of national language policy.
The objectives of this article are twofold. First, it seeks to analyze the mechanisms through which digital language movements attempt to influence national language policy whether by mobilizing attention, supplying linguistic resources, or pressuring institutions. Second, it examines how policymakers perceive these interventions, identifying the conditions under which they are either adopted, resisted, or ignored.

Correspondingly, the study is guided by two central research questions:
I. How do digital language movements seek to shape national language policy?
II. How do policy makers perceive, adopt, or resist grassroots digital interventions in the policymaking process?
By addressing these questions, this article contributes to the growing body of work on digital activism and language planning, foregrounding the interplay between grassroots agency and state

institutions. It highlights both the opportunities and limitations of digital activism as a tool for influencing national language policy in the twenty-first century.

Conceptual Framework

Digital Activism: Digital activism refers to the use of online platforms, tools, and networks to organize, mobilize, and advocate for social or political change. In linguistics, it includes campaigns to promote minority languages, create digital resources, or pressure governments through online petitions and hashtags (Milan 2015).

Language Policy: Language policy encompasses the laws, regulations, and ideological orientations that govern the role and use of languages in society. It reflects decisions about which languages are promoted, tolerated, or marginalized within institutions such as schools and government (Shohamy 2018).

Language Planning: Language planning refers to deliberate efforts by governments, communities, or activists to influence the structure, use, or status of a language. It is often categorized into status planning (roles assigned to languages), corpus planning (development of grammar, lexicon, orthography), and acquisition planning (promotion of learning) (Ricento 2019).

Linguistic Citizenship: Linguistic citizenship describes how individuals and communities use language to claim rights, voice, and participation in society. It emphasizes bottom-up, grassroots engagement with language issues, especially in contexts of inequality or multilingualism (Stroud and Kerfoot 2020).

National Policy: National policy refers to strategic decisions or frameworks adopted by a state to govern specific sectors, including education, health, or culture. In the context of languages, it determines how linguistic diversity is managed at the state level and reflects broader political ideologies (McCarty 2021).

Social media: Social media are digital platforms (e.g., Twitter/X, Facebook, TikTok) that enable users to create, share, and interact with content. These platforms have become central spaces for

activism, identity construction, and language innovation (Howard and Parks 2021).

Minority Languages: Minority languages are those spoken by smaller communities within a larger nation-state, often lacking institutional support. Their survival is tied to cultural identity, and they are increasingly promoted or revitalized through digital platforms (Fishman and García 2017).

Concept of Digital Language

The concept of digital language movements refers to grassroots campaigns and initiatives that use digital platforms social media, collaborative online repositories, blogs, and digital archives to promote the recognition, revitalization, and visibility of languages, particularly minority and endangered ones. These movements differ from traditional activism by their reliance on networked participation, transnational connections, and rapid content circulation (Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou 2019). They are underpinned by the idea of linguistic citizenship, which highlights the active participation of speakers in shaping language norms and policies beyond state-centric paradigms (Stroud and Kerfoot 2020).

National language policy, in contrast, refers to the official frameworks, decisions, and guidelines through which states regulate the status, use, and promotion of languages. Traditionally, this process has been centralized, slow-moving, and influenced by ideological agendas such as nationalism, modernization, or globalization (McCarty 2021). The conceptual tension between the agility of digital language activism and the inertia of policy institutions provides a fertile ground for analysis in this study.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on two main theoretical approaches:

1. **Language Policy and Planning (LPP) Theory:** Classical LPP distinguishes between status planning (assigning

functions to languages), corpus planning (developing linguistic forms such as orthographies), and acquisition planning (promoting language learning) (Kaplan and Baldauf, revisited by Ricento 2019). Digital language movements contribute particularly to corpus planning by producing orthographic corpora, online dictionaries, and localization tools and to status planning, by amplifying visibility on digital platforms.

2. **Linguistic Citizenship Theory:** Stroud and Kerfoot (2020) propose linguistic citizenship as an alternative framework that emphasizes bottom-up, participatory, and rights-based approaches to language planning. Unlike traditional policy frameworks, linguistic citizenship situates ordinary speakers as active agents, using digital tools to demand recognition, challenge state ideologies, and expand the symbolic and practical domains of their languages. This framework is crucial to understanding the activist dimension of digital movements and their influence on policymaking.

Together, these perspectives help frame digital activism not merely as symbolic resistance but as a substantive intervention in language planning processes.

Overview of Digital Language Movements and National Language Policy

Recent studies highlight how digital activism has reshaped the visibility of minority and indigenous languages in various contexts. Deumert (2020) shows that mobile communication has enabled linguistic communities in Africa and beyond to create parallel spaces of visibility outside official state recognition. Similarly, Jones and Uribe-Jongbloed (2021) examine how social media platforms facilitate multilingual creativity, enabling communities to construct alternative linguistic publics.

In relation to policy influence, Klemenčič and Furlan (2021) argue that digital participation enhances linguistic diversity primarily at the agenda-setting stage of policymaking. Campaigns that provide data-driven resources orthographic guidelines, corpora, or open-source fonts have a stronger chance of being integrated into official frameworks. For example, in Latin America, indigenous language activists have created online corpora that were later adopted by state institutions to support educational reforms (López and Sichra 2019).

However, tensions persist. Policymakers often question the legitimacy of online activism, particularly when participation is uneven or when digital divides marginalize rural communities (Ndhlovu and Makalela 2021). Stroud and Kerfoot (2020) note that while digital movements expand the symbolic space of minority languages, their uptake in policy remains contingent upon the presence of institutional allies who can champion these demands within bureaucratic structures.

The literature indicates that digital platforms have reconfigured the dynamics of language activism, allowing communities to bypass traditional gatekeepers and exert new forms of influence. However, scholarship also reveals limitations: digital activism often impacts symbolic recognition more than structural change, and institutional adoption remains uneven across contexts.

The gap lies in comparative analyses of how activists and policymakers perceive these processes differently. While activists emphasize visibility, empowerment, and resource creation, policymakers prioritize feasibility, institutional alignment, and political legitimacy. This article addresses this gap by juxtaposing the perspectives of activists and policymakers to provide a nuanced account of the influence of digital language movements on national language policy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design in order to capture the perspectives of both digital activists and policymakers on the influence of digital language movements on national language policy. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it foregrounds the lived experiences, strategies, and interpretations of participants rather than quantifiable outcomes (Creswell and Poth 2018). The research design integrates document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography, combining multiple sources of data to achieve triangulation and strengthen validity.

Instruments of Data Collection

Two primary instruments were employed:

i. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** This instrument allowed for in-depth exploration of participant perspectives while maintaining flexibility to probe emerging themes. Interview guides were designed separately for activists and policymakers, focusing on perceptions of digital activism, strategies of influence, and policy response. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized as effective for examining complex sociopolitical phenomena where stakeholder perspectives diverge (Bryman 2016).

ii. **Document Analysis Grid:** A systematic grid was developed to analyze policy documents, online petitions, digital corpora, and campaign materials. The grid included categories such as campaign objectives, linguistic resources produced, policy references, and evidence of institutional uptake. Document analysis helps to contextualize participant narratives within broader policy and digital activism discourses (Bowen 2009).

Data Sources

The study draws on two main sources of data:

i. **Policy Documents and Digital Campaign Archives:** National language policy documents, government circulars,

and online activist archives (including petitions, open-source orthographies, and social media campaigns) served as a key source for tracing how digital initiatives intersect with policy debates.

ii. **Stakeholder Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups: (a) language activists engaged in digital campaigns for linguistic recognition and resource creation, and (b) policymakers, including officials from ministries of education, cultural affairs, or language commissions. This dual source provides insight into both bottom-up activism and top-down policy perspectives.

Data Analysis

Two complementary analytic approaches were used:

i. **Thematic Analysis:** Interview transcripts and campaign materials were coded inductively to identify recurring themes such as agenda-setting, resource creation, legitimacy, and resistance. Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step framework guided the thematic analysis process, ensuring systematic identification of patterns.

ii. **Discourse Analysis:** Policy documents and digital campaigns were further examined through critical discourse analysis, focusing on how language ideologies, power relations, and institutional narratives are constructed. This method is particularly suitable for uncovering tensions between activist discourse and policy discourse (Wodak and Meyer 2016).

By combining thematic and discourse analysis, the study captures both the content of stakeholder perspectives and the discursive strategies through which language policy debates are framed.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Research Question 1: How do digital language movements seek to shape national language policy?

Strategy	Description	Evidence from Data	Theoretical Alignment
Agenda-Setting through Visibility	Use of hashtags, viral videos, and petitions to attract national attention.	Twitter campaign on minority orthographies "forced the Ministry to acknowledge our concerns publicly."	Supports Klemenčič & Furlan (2021) – digital participation most impactful at agenda-setting stage.
Resource Production as Corpus Planning	Creation of open-source corpora, orthographies, lexicons, and localization tools.	30,000-word digital lexicon later cited in ministry report.	Aligns with Ricento (2019) – grassroots actors contribute to corpus planning.
Pressure Mobilization & International Advocacy	Use of petitions to UNESCO, AU, etc. to apply external pressure.	Campaigns appealed to global bodies to pressure national actors.	Resonates with Stroud & Kerfoot (2020) – linguistic citizenship claims legitimacy locally & globally.

Note: Activists use digital platforms not only for visibility but also to supply practical resources and leverage international legitimacy to position themselves as policy stakeholders.

Research Question 2: How do policymakers perceive, adopt, or resist grassroots digital interventions?

Perception/ Response	Description	Evidence from Data	Theoretical Alignment
Recognition of Symbolic Value	Digital campaigns seen as valuable for cultural identity.	Policymaker: "These initiatives show us that people care about their languages."	Echoes McCarty (2021) – language policy influenced by identity discourses.
Skepticism about Representativeness & Feasibility	Activists seen as unrepresentative elites; budget/curriculum constraints cited.	Concern that "a few digitally connected individuals" do not represent rural communities.	Resonates with Ndhlovu & Makalela (2021) – digital divides privilege elites.

Conditional Adoption via Institutional Allies	Activist tools accepted when validated by trusted experts.	Orthographic guide adopted after validation by university linguist on national committee.	Supports Klemenčič & Furlan (2021) – institutional allies needed for policy impact.

Note: Policymakers acknowledge symbolic and technical value but often resist systemic adoption unless proposals pass through legitimacy checks and feasibility filters.

Cross-Cutting Analysis

Dimension	Activist Perspective	Policymaker Perspective	Implication
Legitimacy	Digital activism = linguistic citizenship, empowerment.	Questioned representativeness, urban bias.	Activists claim voice, policymakers demand broader validation.
Policy Tools	Provide ready-made linguistic resources (lexicons, orthographies).	Require institutional vetting and feasibility checks.	Resource adoption depends on expert allies.
Impact Level	Most effective at agenda-setting & resource provision.	Structural adoption constrained by institutional filters.	Long-term influence needs alliances within policymaking bodies.

Note: The mismatch between activist empowerment goals and policymaker feasibility concerns explains why campaigns often shift discourse but rarely yield structural reforms.

Results and Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the dual dynamics of digital language movements: while they are effective in raising visibility and providing linguistic resources, their impact on policy adoption remains contingent on institutional structures and political feasibility. These dynamics reflect both the empowering and constraining aspects of digital activism in relation to national language policy.

i. Digital Activism as Agenda-Setting Power

The results confirm that digital campaigns excel at agenda-setting, particularly through social media visibility. Hashtag movements and online petitions often propelled language issues into public discourse. For instance, activists' online campaign for the inclusion of indigenous languages in a school curriculum sparked widespread discussion across Twitter, leading one ministry to hold a stakeholder forum for the first time in over a decade.

This aligns with Klemenčič and Furlan's (2021) assertion that digital activism plays a pivotal role in shaping policy debates before formal decisions are made. However, the findings also suggest that visibility alone is insufficient for structural transformation. Policymakers recognized the campaigns symbolically but rarely translated them into immediate policy revisions.

ii. Grassroots Resource Production and Policy Uptake

One of the most striking findings was activists' role in producing technical linguistic resources such as orthographies, online lexicons, and localized software. These resources filled critical gaps in official planning. For example, the open-source 30,000-word lexicon created by activists was cited in a ministry report as a "useful complementary material" for curriculum reform.

This reflects Ricento's (2019) observation that non-state actors increasingly participate in corpus planning, an area once dominated by state-appointed experts. Yet, as the data shows, the adoption of such resources was conditional on validation by institutional allies, such as university linguists serving on advisory committees. This confirms McCarty's (2021) claim that policy uptake often requires alignment between grassroots initiatives and institutional gatekeepers.

iii. Policymakers' Ambivalence: Symbolic Acknowledgement vs. Structural Resistance

The interviews revealed that policymakers acknowledged the cultural value of digital activism but questioned its representativeness and practical feasibility. For instance, one

official noted that online campaigns were "impressive" but doubted their reach in rural areas where internet access remains limited. This concern highlights the digital divide, echoing Ndhlovu and Makalela's (2021) warning that digital activism risks privileging urban, educated elites over rural communities.

Moreover, structural resistance emerged in the form of budgetary limitations and curricular overload. Policymakers often argued that while grassroots initiatives were commendable, the state lacked resources to support their integration. This tension illustrates what Stroud and Kerfoot (2020) call the paradox of linguistic citizenship: while communities assert rights digitally, institutions maintain structural barriers that inhibit full recognition.

iv. Conditional Success through Institutional Alliances

The analysis revealed that successful activist influence occurred only when institutional allies championed grassroots resources within policy frameworks. For example, an activist-developed orthography was adopted into a government teacher training manual only after validation by a university professor on the national language committee.

This pattern demonstrates that digital activism alone is rarely sufficient. Rather, influence requires a hybrid model where digital visibility intersects with traditional policy pathways. As Deumert (2020) argues, digital activism provides "alternative centers of authority," but institutional recognition remains necessary for long-term policy adoption.

v. Implications for Language Policy Studies

These findings have two major implications:

- First, they confirm the growing agency of digital movements in shaping the discursive landscape of language policy. By providing visibility and resources, activists shift debates and highlight marginalized voices.
- Second, they reveal the limitations of digital activism when faced with institutional inertia, resource scarcity, and questions of legitimacy.

Thus, digital movements are best understood as complementary actors in the language policy process effective in advocacy and resource creation but dependent on alliances for structural uptake.

Example Synthesis

- Activist perspective: A grassroots group creates a digital Igbo-French lexicon and mobilizes 50,000 online petition signatures.
- Policymaker response: The Ministry praises the initiative for "cultural awareness" but only integrates the lexicon after a university linguist validates it.
- Discussion: This example illustrates both the empowerment (agenda-setting and resource creation) and the constraint (dependence on institutional validation) that characterize digital language activism.

Conclusion

This study examined how digital language movements influence national language policy through the perspectives of activists and policymakers. The findings reveal that activists leverage digital tools to achieve three main objectives: agenda-setting, resource creation, and international pressure. These initiatives successfully raise visibility and provide concrete linguistic resources but face resistance when confronted with issues of legitimacy, feasibility, and institutional inertia.

Policymakers, while acknowledging the symbolic value of digital activism, often resist full integration due to concerns about representativeness, limited budgets, and existing curricular demands. Yet the study also shows that activist initiatives can be adopted when validated by institutional allies, such as academics or policymakers sympathetic to grassroots causes.

In short, digital language movements act as catalysts in shaping discourse and providing resources, but their structural impact depends on alignment with institutional frameworks. This underscores the importance of viewing digital activism and

policymaking not as opposing forces but as interdependent actors within a broader ecology of language planning.

Recommendations

1. Collaborating with universities, linguists, and advisory committees can help legitimize grassroots initiatives and increase chances of policy adoption.
2. To counter criticisms of elitism, activists should ensure that digital campaigns are complemented by offline community engagement in rural or less connected areas.
3. Beyond identity-based appeals, activists should highlight how digital resources contribute to national goals such as education quality, employability, and cultural preservation.
4. Recognize Digital Activism as Policy Input: Ministries should view grassroots campaigns as preliminary policy laboratories that generate innovative solutions and reflect community priorities.
5. Establishing regular digital forums where activists, linguists, and policymakers can interact would institutionalize dialogue and reduce mistrust.
6. Rather than dismissing digital resources outright, policymakers could launch small-scale pilot projects (e.g., introducing activist-produced lexicons in selected schools) before nationwide adoption.

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