

LETTER OF THE DAY

Languages matter: The digital struggle for our mother tongues

I spent last Friday walking through colourful displays of folk tales, proverbs and children's books set up in the quadrangle at Makerere University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

When the main hall filled for the formal ceremony, His Majesty William Gabula Nadioppe IV launched Lusoga as a course and reminded us that the day's theme, "Languages Matter: Harnessing technology to document and develop Uganda's indigenous languages," was no mere slogan.

The event brought together ministers, cultural leaders, publishers, technologists and students. As project lead for the Runyankore Wikipedia with the Wikimedia Community User Group Uganda, I was struck by how the celebrations turned into a national call to act.

The Kyabazinga of Busoga framed the inclusion of Lusoga at Makerere as both symbolic and strategic. By elevating a language from community spaces into formal academic recognition, he said, we affirm that each of Uganda's more than 50 languages carries distinct worldviews, oral traditions and "collective memory across generations".

He also warned that our languages are marginalised in the digital age and that, without deliberate integration digital archives, mobile applications, AI translation tools and online dictionaries, they could drift toward extinction. His words echoed around the hall: "Every language lost is a piece of humanity lost". That warning stung, because I know what it looks like when a language starts disappearing.

Years ago, my daughter and her cousins spoke Rukiga flu-

ently at home. One term a teacher beat them for using "vernacular" in class, insisting that English was the only acceptable medium.

The children stopped speaking Rukiga at home. They even invented a game of correcting each other for slipping into what they now called "vernacular." Recently, my daughter asked me for *Katondoozi y'oRunyankore-Rukiga*. She wanted to relearn the very vocabulary she had been punished for speaking.

How many more children will have to search for their mother tongue like a forgotten heirloom?

The incident illustrates the colonial residue in our classrooms; languages are marked as uneducated, and yet they carry emotional and cognitive power.

As someone involved in digitising Runyankore on Wikipedia, I see daily the tension between celebration and reality. Luga-

da Wikipedia has more than 5,000 articles accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Runyankore, still in the incubator, has close to 1,000 drafts.

Contributors wrestle with orthography, translation and limited sources. Yet when we publish an article about a local herb or a historical figure, we reclaim a fragment of our story from the vast English-dominated internet.

Digital decolonisation isn't a metaphor; it is the painstaking process of ensuring that our languages have a home online where future generations can learn without shame.

International Mother Language Day should not be reduced to annual speeches and photographs. The launch of Lusoga at Makerere is an important milestone, but the real work happens after the applause ends.

It happens when parents choose to speak Runyankore or

Lusoga at home, when publishers invest in children's books in Lugbara, when tech startups develop chatbots in Ateso, and when policymakers fund digital archives and language research.

It also happens online: Runyankore/Rukiga and Luganda speakers, let us move our languages from the margins to the mainstream by freely contributing, writing and translating on Wikipedia so that our mother tongues thrive in Uganda's digital future.

It happens when we treat our languages not as relics of the past but as living tools for innovation and development. Only then will our children stop associating their mother tongue with punishment and start recognising it as the foundation of their identity.

Christopher Liberty,
liberty.christopher@alumni.
lse.ac.uk

