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NEW SPACES FOR AN ANCIENT VOICE: CAN ARBËRESH CULTURE AND ITS LITERARY HERITAGE THRIVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE?

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Abstract

This article discusses attempts to safeguard the Arbëresh language and literature as an exceptional case of linguistic-ethnic vitality over time. The Arbëresh, the descendants of Albanian refugees who settled in Southern Italy from the 15th to 18th centuries, have preserved their language and some traditions as well as the Byzantine Rite while integrating deeply into Italian society. In the last decades, this heritage has faced challenges: globalization and technological change have eroded intergenerational transmission so much that UNESCO categorized Arbëresh in 2010 as a “severely endangered” language.

In response to these challenges, the study explores the transition of Arbëresh language and literature from traditional oral and written forms into the digital sphere. It argues that digitalization should not be seen merely as a technical process of preservation but as a strategic tool for addressing the contemporary difficulties faced by minority cultures. By reflecting on the historical pillars of Arbëresh continuity—such as the *gjitonia*, the family unit, and religious institutions—the paper outlines a framework for digital revitalization, including the creation of digital corpora, the documentation of oral heritage, and the development of interactive learning platforms.

The study concludes that strategically integrating digital tools can help overcome geographical dispersion, reconnect the diaspora with its cultural roots, and support the long-term vitality of the Arbëresh language in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *minority languages, Arbëresh literature, digitalization, globalization, language preservation, cultural identity.*

1. Introduction: Theoretical and Historical Framework

The historical trajectory of the Arbëresh people in Southern Italy constitutes a compelling case study of long-term ethno-linguistic endurance. Emerging from successive waves of migration following the death of the Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu in 1468, these communities established a “second motherland” (*piana*) across regions such as Calabria, Sicily, and Puglia. Contrary to the fate of many minority groups that gradually dissolve into the dominant host culture, the Arbëresh have maintained a distinct linguistic and cultural identity for more than six centuries. This continuity

cannot be attributed solely to geographic isolation in mountainous areas; rather, it reflects a deliberate form of cultural self-preservation in which language, religious practice, and social organization were inextricably intertwined (Altimari, Bolognari, and Carozza 1986, 15–18).

The safeguarding of Arbëresh identity was historically anchored in a set of what may be defined as “organic pillars of survival.” Central among these was the *gjitonia*, a micro-urban social structure that ensured dense interpersonal interaction and reinforced linguistic cohesion. Within this communal framework, Arbërisht functioned as the primary language of everyday communication, thereby limiting the penetration of surrounding Italian dialects (De Rada 1866). Complementing this social mechanism was the adherence to the Byzantine Rite, which operated as a powerful cultural marker. Its distinct liturgical language and ritual practices effectively prevented the ecclesiastical assimilation often associated with the Latin Rite, reinforcing a sense of separateness and continuity (Rodotà 1758).

In the contemporary era, however, the conditions that once sustained this equilibrium have been fundamentally altered. The transition from a predominantly agrarian and locally bounded society to a globalized and technologically mediated one has progressively eroded the traditional channels of linguistic transmission, particularly the family unit and the *gjitonia*. Processes such as urban migration, demographic decline, and the expansion of Italian-language education and media have significantly reduced the functional domains of Arbërisht. As a result, UNESCO’s classification of the language as “severely endangered” (2010) underscores the urgency of rethinking preservation strategies beyond conventional archival practices, which increasingly fail to engage younger generations.

Against this backdrop, the present study advances the argument that digitalization constitutes a “third space” for cultural survival. The migration of Arbëresh literature and oral traditions into the digital sphere is not framed here as a rupture with authenticity, but rather as a necessary adaptation to contemporary modes of communication and knowledge transmission. By overcoming the material limitations of rare manuscripts, localized dialects, and geographically fragmented communities, digital tools enable the construction of a transnational Arbëresh cultural space capable of reconnecting dispersed members of the community with their linguistic heritage (Mandalà 2007). Accordingly, this paper assesses the current state of Arbëresh linguistic vitality and outlines a strategic framework in which digital corpora and interactive media function as instruments of active cultural renewal.

From a methodological perspective, the study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research approach that integrates theoretical analysis, historical contextualization, and critical engagement with existing scholarly literature on minority languages, Arbëresh studies, and digital humanities. The discussion is grounded in key sociolinguistic theories of language endangerment and revitalization, particularly those articulated by Fishman and Crystal, alongside historical and philological sources central to the formation and continuity of Arbëresh culture. Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork, the paper employs a conceptual framework to examine the transformation of traditional mechanisms of linguistic transmission and to evaluate digitalization as a strategic model for cultural revitalization. This approach enables a critical synthesis of historical experience and contemporary digital practices, positioning the digital sphere as a viable arena for the preservation and renewal of Arbëresh language and literature.

2. The Crisis of Traditional Pillars and the Modern Paradigm Shift

The long-term continuity of the Arbëresh community rested on a fragile balance between relative social isolation and strong institutional forms of cultural preservation. Over the course of the late twentieth century, however, profound socio-economic changes disrupted this balance. One of the most visible consequences has been the gradual decline of the *gjitonia* as an active social unit. Once a shared physical space where language was transmitted naturally through everyday interaction, it has lost much of its social function as urbanization and labor migration drew younger generations toward

industrial centers in Northern Italy and beyond. As a result, the close-knit linguistic environment that had sustained Arbërisht for centuries was progressively weakened, giving rise to processes commonly described in sociolinguistics as “language attrition” (Fishman 1991, 82).

At the same time, the modern educational system—despite its role in promoting literacy and social mobility—has often contributed to the marginalization of minority languages. For decades, the absence of Arbërisht from formal schooling confined it to the private sphere, depriving it of symbolic and institutional prestige as a language of knowledge, administration, and public life. Even after the adoption of Law 482/1999, which formally recognizes linguistic minorities in Italy, its practical implementation has remained uneven. The continued lack of standardized teaching materials and adequate digital resources has limited the law’s effectiveness, leaving Arbërisht largely excluded from structured educational frameworks (Altimari, Bolognari, and Carrozza 1986).

Within this broader context of social and linguistic fragmentation, the family unit—once the primary site of intergenerational transmission—has also undergone significant change. The pervasive influence of Italian-language mass media now shapes the cultural references and linguistic habits of Arbëresh youth, often at the expense of their ancestral language. As everyday use declines, Arbërisht risks being reduced to a largely symbolic code, reserved for ritual contexts, traditional songs, and commemorative occasions. It is in response to this shift that the present study argues for a reorientation of preservation strategies: from the exclusively physical space of the *gjitonia* toward what may be described as a “Digital Gjitonia.” Through digital platforms and media, new spaces for linguistic and literary engagement can emerge, capable of compensating—at least in part—for the erosion of traditional social structures.

3. Digitalization as a Strategic Tool for Linguistic and Literary Revitalization

The shift from a traditional way of life, rooted in the organic coexistence within the closed environments of the *gjitonia*, to a high-tech and globalized reality has created a significant challenge for minority languages. Nevertheless, this study argues that digitalization provides an unprecedented opportunity for the “re-territorialization” of Arbëresh culture. In today’s global landscape, the survival of a language increasingly depends on its “digital vitality”—the extent to which a language is present and accessible in the virtual sphere. As David Crystal (2000, 141) notes, for a minority language to survive, it must establish a strong presence in the dominant media of the time. For the Arbëresh, this requires moving beyond the physical boundaries of the village toward a “Digital Gjitonia,” where technology becomes an interactive space that overcomes geographical fragmentation.

A central pillar of this strategy is the creation of bilingual poetic anthologies (Arbërisht–Italian). Rooted in the 19th-century tradition of Girolamo De Rada (1866), this practice now gains a new dimension through multimedia formats. By presenting parallel texts, these anthologies serve as a vital bridge for younger generations who may have only a passive knowledge of Arbërisht but are fully fluent in Italian. In digital form, these works can be enriched with hypertexts and informational layers, allowing Arbëresh poetry to circulate freely on global platforms. This type of “linguistic mediation” enhances the prestige of Arbërisht, positioning it not merely as a domestic dialect but as a literary language with universal aesthetic value, accessible to both the diaspora and international scholars (Altimari 2015).

Moreover, the creation of comprehensive digital corpora represents a scientific necessity. Much of the Arbëresh literary heritage remains confined to physical archives or specialized libraries, often inaccessible to the general public. Digitalization, through high-resolution scanning and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology, allows these rare manuscripts to become widely accessible. This process is not merely passive archiving; it enables the works of authors such as Lekë Matranga, Zef

Schirò, and Giuseppe Serembe to be integrated into global Digital Humanities networks. In this way, literary memory remains active and open for research and reinterpretation, preventing these texts from becoming static, museum-like relics (Mandalà 2007).

Beyond the archiving of written texts, the digitalization of oral heritage is critically important. Phonetic nuances, idiomatic expressions, and the rich dialectal diversity of Arbërisht are primarily preserved among the elderly. Capturing this “living archive” through high-quality audio and video recordings—and distributing them via platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, or podcasts—creates a direct connection between the ancestral past and the digital future. This ensures that the “soul” of the language—its rhythm, metaphors, and unique idioms—is not lost with the passing of native speakers but is transformed into a dynamic resource for language learning and the revitalization of ethnic identity.

Finally, the development of interactive educational platforms represents the most active phase of cultural resistance. As traditional family-based methods of language transmission struggle in the face of mass urbanization, the adoption of gamified learning models (such as Duolingo-style apps) makes Arbërisht attractive to “digital natives.” This approach provides the language with functional use in the daily lives of younger speakers, supporting Joshua Fishman’s (1991) thesis that reversing language shift requires a language to secure its place within modern communication tools. In this way, digitalization ceases to be a threat and becomes the primary instrument for ensuring the continuity of a six-century-old culture in the era of globalization.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight that the preservation of the Arbëresh linguistic and literary heritage has reached a critical historical crossroads. While traditional pillars of resilience—the *gjitonia*, the family unit, and the Byzantine Rite—successfully maintained cultural continuity for six centuries, they are no longer sufficient to withstand the systemic pressures of modern globalization and demographic change. The classification of Arbëresh as a “severely endangered” language underscores the urgent need to shift from passive, nostalgic preservation toward active, technology-driven revitalization.

The integration of digital tools represents more than a technical upgrade; it is a strategic redefinition of cultural space. By creating a “Digital Gjitonia,” the community can overcome geographical dispersion, reconnecting the diaspora with its ancestral roots through a shared virtual territory. As demonstrated in this study, developing comprehensive digital corpora and archiving oral traditions are essential for democratizing access to historical knowledge and ensuring that the unique phonetic and idiomatic richness of the language is not lost with the passing of the current generation of speakers.

Moreover, the implementation of bilingual digital anthologies and interactive educational platforms helps increase the social prestige of Arbërisht among younger “digital natives.” By presenting the language as a modern, functional medium rather than an outdated relic, these initiatives effectively bridge the intergenerational gap and make cultural transmission meaningful in contemporary contexts.

Ultimately, the survival of the Arbëresh identity in the 21st century depends on the synergy between academic institutions, cultural organizations, and technological innovation. If strategically employed, digitalization offers a second life to this centuries-old heritage, ensuring that the voices of the past continue to resonate within the digital landscape of the future.

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