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**ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE CHOICES AMONG TRADERS IN BUKURU
METROPOLIS, JOS, PLATEAU STATE**

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Abstract:

This study investigates the dynamics of language choices among traders in Bukuru Metropolis, Jos, Plateau State, a multilingual commercial hub where Hausa, English, Nigerian Pidgin, Igbo, and Berom intersect in everyday market interactions. Anchored in Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (1979), the research examines how traders use language to express group affiliation, assert identity, negotiate status, and bridge in-group/out-group boundaries to achieve goals such as solidarity, persuasion, identity marking, and professionalism. A qualitative design was adopted, employing participant observation and oral interviews. From the diverse trading population, a purposive sample of 10 interactions was collected, encompassing provision sellers, vegetable vendors, spare-parts dealers, and phone/accessory sellers. Data were presented descriptively in tabular form and analyzed using social identity tools. Findings reveal that Nigerian Pidgin and Hausa dominate as transactional codes, with Pidgin fostering inter-group neutrality and inclusiveness, while Hausa serves as the regional lingua franca in greetings and negotiations to facilitate out-group integration. English is used strategically in contexts requiring prestige, clarity, or modernity to signal status negotiation, whereas Igbo and Berom appear in identity-driven exchanges, especially within in-group affiliation or ethnic pride contexts. The study concludes that language choice in Bukuru markets is deliberate and adaptive, reflecting the multilingual reality of Plateau State. It highlights the role of in-group/out-group strategies in sustaining peaceful coexistence and enhancing socio-economic transactions.

Keywords: Language, choices, traders, Bukuru, Jos, metropolis

INTRODUCTION

Language is central to human interaction, shaping how individuals negotiate meaning, build relationships, and conduct social and economic activities. In multilingual societies, the choice of language within particular domains often goes beyond mere communication, reflecting patterns of identity, power, solidarity, and economic pragmatism. Markets, as spaces of intense social and cultural exchange, provide fertile ground for exploring such dynamics. The Bukuru metropolis in Jos, Plateau State, represents a unique sociolinguistic landscape where people from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds converge daily for trade and livelihood. Within this environment, language choice is not only a communicative necessity but also a strategic act that determines social inclusion, bargaining success, and interpersonal trust.

The sociolinguistic complexity of Bukuru arises from its history as a melting pot of indigenous groups, migrants, and settlers, each bringing different linguistic repertoires into the marketplace. Hausa, English, and various indigenous Plateau languages intersect in ways that reveal broader issues of language dominance, accommodation, and code-switching. Traders, in particular, must navigate these linguistic resources to reach wider clientele, maintain social cohesion, and assert cultural identity. Such linguistic practices in everyday economic transactions underscore the intricate relationship between language, society, and commerce, making the Bukuru market an important site for sociolinguistic investigation.

By examining the language choices of traders in this context, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how multilingual speakers manage communication in a socially and economically significant domain. It also illuminates how language reflects and shapes social realities in an urban Nigerian setting, offering insights into the broader dynamics of language use in multicultural communities.

In multilingual urban settings such as Bukuru metropolis, the marketplace serves as a crucial arena where language is employed not only for communication but also as a marker of identity, solidarity, and economic agency. However, the dynamics of language choice among traders remain underexplored despite their significance in sustaining social and commercial interactions. While Hausa often functions as a lingua franca in northern Nigeria, the presence of English, indigenous Plateau languages, and code-switching practices complicates the linguistic ecology of Bukuru. Traders must constantly negotiate these choices to facilitate transactions, foster trust, and navigate cultural diversity. Yet, little empirical research has been conducted to investigate how these choices are made, the sociolinguistic factors that influence them, and the broader implications for language maintenance, shift, and identity in this cosmopolitan setting. This gap necessitates a systematic sociolinguistic analysis

of language practices among traders in Bukuru metropolis. This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the patterns of language choice employed by traders in Bukuru metropolis during their market interactions.
2. To analyze the sociolinguistic factors influencing traders' language choices in the Bukuru marketplace.

This research is confined to the Bukuru metropolis in Jos, Plateau State, with specific focus on traders operating within its major markets. The study investigates the language choices traders employ in their daily commercial interactions, emphasizing the interplay of Hausa, English, and indigenous Plateau languages. The analysis is limited to sociolinguistic perspectives, particularly examining patterns of choice and the underlying social, cultural, and economic factors that shape them. It does not extend to other urban centers outside Bukuru, nor does it seek to provide a comprehensive grammatical or phonological analysis of the languages in use. Instead, the study situates itself within the domain of language use in context, highlighting the role of linguistic choice in facilitating communication and shaping social relations in a multilingual marketplace.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

Language Choice

Language choice refers to the strategic selection of a particular language or linguistic variety from an individual's repertoire in a given interaction. This decision is seldom arbitrary; it is a sociolinguistic act deeply embedded in context, participant relationships, and communicative goals. As Wardhaugh asserts, language choice resides at the intersection of linguistic competence and social meaning, reflecting a speaker's awareness of societal norms and power structures (102). In multilingual marketplaces like Bukuru, this concept is paramount. Holmes further elaborates that choices are influenced by factors such as the setting (domain), the topic of discussion, and the function of the interaction; whether it is to persuade, inform, or build rapport (65). For traders, selecting Hausa for a broad audience, English for formal transactions, or a local Plateau language for a specific ethnic clientele are calculated moves. These choices function as essential tools for economic inclusion, customer persuasion, and trust-building, turning linguistic dexterity into a commercial asset.

Multilingualism

Multilingualism denotes the dynamic coexistence and active use of two or more languages within a society, a community, or by an individual. It is not merely a linguistic state but a complex social practice that shapes and is shaped by cultural and economic realities. Romaine defines it as the hallmark of societies where language contact is a daily experience, requiring individuals to navigate multiple linguistic codes as a part of normal life (56). In the context of Bukuru, where Hausa, English, and indigenous languages converge, multilingualism is a fundamental resource. Edwards notes that in such settings, multilingualism is often a marker of "additive" rather than "subtractive" identity, allowing individuals to expand their social and economic networks without necessarily sacrificing their native linguistic heritage (78). This communicative flexibility allows a trader to signal solidarity with local customers through a shared mother tongue while simultaneously using Hausa as a lingua franca or English to project modernity and access wider markets, thereby transforming linguistic diversity into economic capital.

Code-Switching

Code-switching is the conscious or subconscious alternation between two or more languages, or varieties of the same language, within a single discourse event. A foundational scholar, Gumperz, conceptualized it as a conversational strategy, or "contextualization cue," that speakers use to negotiate social roles, redefine a situation, or express nuance (151). It is a skilled performance, not a linguistic deficit. Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model provides a further framework, suggesting that speakers make choices along a spectrum from "marked" (unexpected, often carrying a specific social message) to "unmarked" (expected, normative for the situation) (43). In Bukuru market, a trader might switch from Hausa to English to quote a price, leveraging the perceived authority of English in commercial contexts, or switch to a customer's native tongue to create intimacy and trust. This fluid movement is a direct reflection of sociolinguistic adaptability, demonstrating how speakers expertly manipulate linguistic boundaries to achieve their communicative and economic objectives.

Language and Identity

The intrinsic link between language and identity posits that language is not merely a tool for communication but a primary symbol of personal and collective identity. Fishman powerfully argues that language is a core component of the "soul" of a culture, embodying shared history, values, and a sense of belonging (87). One's linguistic choices can index ethnicity, social class, level of education, and regional affiliation. As Joseph explains, identity is not a fixed entity but is continually

performed and constructed through discourse; we "do" identity with our language choices (112). In Bukuru marketplace, this performance is central to economic survival. A trader's use of a specific Plateau language affirms an ethnic identity to foster loyalty, while the use of standardized Hausa or English might project an identity of a sophisticated, urban, or educated businessperson. Thus, language becomes a crucial resource for negotiating social positioning and facilitating integration within the complex social fabric of the market.

2.2 Empirical Review

Ayoola (2009) investigated "Haggling exchanges at meat stalls in some markets in Lagos, Nigeria" through close discourse-analytic transcription of naturally occurring buyer-seller interactions. Anchored in discourse-pragmatics (with attention to speech acts and facework), the study showed that interlocutors strategically deployed humour, flattery, cajoling, dysphemism/euphemism, and price-anchoring moves to pursue transactional advantage while maintaining rapport. It concluded that bargaining in Nigerian urban markets is a norm-governed interactional genre with recognizable linguistic resources and sequential patterns. However, the work centred on a single commodity niche (meat stalls) in Lagos and did not model language choice across multilingual options in a Northern Nigerian marketplace. The present study addresses this by examining how traders in Bukuru metropolis select among Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, English, and local languages across product lines and interlocutor profiles to signal group identity.

Alo and Soneye (2014) extended the socio-pragmatic lens to multiple urban markets, analyzing recorded haggling encounters in "Haggling as a socio-pragmatic strategy in selected urban markets: An amalgam of English and Nigerian languages." Without fastening to a single grand theory, their socio-pragmatic approach foregrounded how participants calibrate coercive and affiliative moves, and how code-switching performs stance and group alignment. They concluded that Nigerian market discourse is an "amalgam" of languages where pragmatic force is finely tuned to social variables. Yet, while richly descriptive, the study offered limited micro-ecological detail about Northern Middle Belt markets or the specific trade ecologies shaping language selection. This research fills that gap by situating language choice in Bukuru's ethnolinguistic mosaic, emphasizing identity negotiation within its commodity ecology.

Uwaechia (2016) provided an ethnography-of-communication account of Nigerian Pidgin in Zaria markets in the thesis titled "Sociolinguistic analysis of Nigerian Pidgin in transactions in Zaria metropolis markets." Grounded in Hymes' Ethnography of Communication, the study documented where, when, and with whom Pidgin is preferred, and the socio-functional rationales traders offer (speed, inclusiveness, reduced formality). It concluded that Pidgin functions as a trade lingua

franca linking heterogeneous participants in Northern markets. Yet the analysis treated “market” as a relatively unitary domain and did not systematically contrast intra-market sub-settings (e.g., farm produce vs. manufactured goods) or test how interlocutor identity cues (dress, accent) trigger different language choices. The present study contributes a fine-grained, sub-domain comparison within Bukuru’s market network and models cue-based switching as identity performance in everyday transactions.

Ayeni (2021) examined “Language choices and its effect in a culturally diversified Nigeria business places: Adopting Giles’ Communication Accommodation Theory,” drawing on recorded interactions transcribed and analyzed for convergence/divergence, code-switching, and pragmatic tactics (greetings, humour, pleading). Findings showed that vendors and customers routinely shift toward mutually intelligible codes (English, Yoruba, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin) to secure rapport or better prices, while occasionally emphasizing ethnic languages to assert identity. The article concluded that such shifts are a core mechanism for inclusive yet competitive multilingual commerce. Because the data spanned varied sites (banks, markets, communication outlets), the market-specific dynamics remained under-specified. Our Bukuru-focused study narrows the context to an intra-city trading hub, testing Social Identity Theory’s predictions against localized patterns of in-group/out-group dynamics in Plateau State.

Guanah (2023) investigated Igbudu Market (Warri) using a descriptive survey design in the study titled “Choice of transaction language among sellers and buyers in Igbudu Market, Warri, Nigeria: Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) option.” The research, theoretically framed by Chomsky’s language acquisition perspective, employed questionnaires and interviews to measure preference patterns. It reported that Nigerian Pidgin English was the predominant transaction code and that 76.06% of respondents supported its adoption as an open-market lingua franca. It concluded that formal recognition and instructional support for NPE would enhance market communication. While offering strong quantitative evidence of code preference, the study did not probe interactional contingencies (e.g., how buyer appearance, age, or first-turn language prime subsequent choices) and focused on a Niger Delta market with different language ecologies from the Middle Belt. The present research addresses these gaps by combining interactional observation with elicited accounts to model contingent language choice among Bukuru traders.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

A suitable theory for this research is Social Identity Theory (SIT) developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979. The theory posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their social group memberships, where social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a

social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 63). In the context of Bukuru metropolis, SIT provides a robust lens for analyzing how traders strategically choose between Hausa, English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous Plateau languages to signal group affiliation or negotiate status. For instance, a trader may use Berom to reinforce in-group solidarity with fellow ethnic members, enhancing cultural pride, or shift to Pidgin to bridge out-groups for economic inclusivity. Conversely, using English may project a modern, educated identity to appeal to diverse clientele. Applying SIT to this study allows for an understanding of language choices as deliberate sociolinguistic strategies shaped by identity, group dynamics, and socio-economic considerations within the multilingual trading environment of Bukuru.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative design, rooted in an interpretivist epistemology, to investigate the relationship between language choice and social identity among traders in Bukuru Metropolis, Jos South. The study population, comprising approximately 251 traders from diverse ethnic backgrounds across four categories (provision stores, vegetable/fruit sellers, automobile spare-parts sellers, and phone/accessory sellers), was sampled purposively to select 20 participants who were actively engaged in multilingual market interactions. The primary method of data collection was participant observation, where the researcher discreetly visited the market from the month of June, 2025 to November 2025 to record 10 natural conversations and language behaviors using a phone recorder, pen, and paper. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively, guided by Social Identity Theory that enabled the identification of patterns of language use in terms of code-switching (between Standard English, Pidgin English, Hausa Language, Igbo Language, and/or Berom Language), and the ways in which language functions as a social marker for in-group affiliation, and/or inter-group integration.

4. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Data from Traders and Customers Conversations in Bukuru Market, Jos

S/N	Interaction Type	Excerpt (Customer/Trader Speech)	Frequency of English	Frequency of Pidgin	Frequency of Hausa	Frequency of Igbo	Frequency of Berom	In-Group Solidarity (SIT)	Inter-Group Integration (SIT)
1	Customer vs Provision Seller	A: "Papa you dey enjoy oo. You get chin chin?" B: "E dey, which type; this small small ones abi the big ones?"	0	2	0	0	0	*	✓
2	Customer vs Provision Seller	A: "Fanta nawa ne?" B: "It's five hundred naira (#500)."	1	0	1	0	0	*	✓
3	Trader vs Trader (Provisions)	A: "Berê nó hir à gya kin zoŋ ni fât-fât." B: "Mà dù wù dá kyè dagwi riri." (This country just keeps moving from one bad news to another)	0	0	0	0	2	✓	*
4	Customer vs Vegetable Seller	A: "Kestioma shik vegetable ka wù nyi?" B: "Ina kwana ma?"	0	0	1	0	1	*	✓

5	Customer vs Vegetable Seller	A: "Good afternoon mama." B: "Yauwa kalua."	1	0	1	0	0	*	✓
6	Customer vs Vegetable Seller	A: "Nawa ni kashin ki?" B: "Two hundre ni."	1	0	1	0	0	*	✓
7	Spare-parts Seller (on phone)	A: "Adimma, kedu gi? Ee, enwere mya, o bu five thousand naira." (Adimma, how are you? Yes, I have it. It is five thousand naira)	0	0	0	1	0	✓	*
8	Customer vs Spare-parts Seller	A: "Good afternoon oga, how business?" B: "Fine, welcome."	1	1	0	0	0	*	✓
9	Phone & Accessory Sellers	A: "Nokia phones here at one thousand six hundred naira only..." B: "Your easy online shopping, Jumia oyoyo... Amin ne."	1	1	1	0	0	*	✓

10	Phone & Accessory Sellers	A: “Nwaj a zwan a kyem nè nye.” (The best of the better is here) B: “No be chochocho! We dey show workings.”	0	1	0	0	1	✓	✓
		Total	5 (English code)	5 (Pidgin code)	5 (Hausa code)	1 (Igbo code)	4 (Berom code)	3	8

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysed data from the Bukuru Metropolis market interactions, framed through Henri Tajfel and John Turner’s Social Identity Theory (SIT), reveal a strategic and dynamic use of language choices, reflecting the multilingual landscape of this vibrant commercial hub. The frequency counts from ten interactions show Nigerian Pidgin used 6 times, Hausa 6 times, English 5 times, Berom 3 times, and Igbo 1 time, highlighting the prevalence of Pidgin and Hausa in market discourse. These choices align with SIT’s principles of in-group solidarity and inter-group integration, as traders and customers deliberately select from their linguistic repertoires, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, English, Igbo, and Berom, to achieve social and economic goals. Inter-group integration, observed in eight interactions (S/N 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10), dominates as a strategy where speakers choose languages to bridge out-groups, fostering rapport, inclusivity, and transactional efficiency. For instance, Pidgin’s high frequency (6 instances, e.g., S/N 1: “Papa you dey enjoy oo” / “E dey, which type”) underscores its role as a neutral lingua franca, facilitating communication across ethnic divides. This is evident in interactions like S/N 8 and S/N 9, where Pidgin (used twice) bridges social gaps, creating familiarity and accessibility. Similarly, Hausa’s 6 occurrences, often in greetings and inquiries (e.g., S/N 4: “Ina kwana ma?”; S/N 6: “Nawa ni kashin ki?”), reflect its status as a regional lingua franca, enabling traders to integrate with diverse customers, as seen in 5 integrative interactions (S/N 2, 4, 5, 6, and 9). English, used 5 times (S/N 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9), appears in contexts requiring formality or prestige, such as pricing (“It’s five hundred naira” in S/N 2) or advertising (“Nokia phones here at one thousand six hundred naira only” in S/N 9), aligning with integration to project status and appeal to diverse, status-conscious clientele. These patterns confirm the research’s observation that language choices are tailored to context and interlocutor, prioritising group affiliation and economic pragmatism.

In-group solidarity, observed in 3 interactions (S/N 3, 7, and 10), is less frequent but significant, particularly in asserting ethnic identity and pride. Berom, used 3 times (S/N 3, 4, and 10), and Igbo, used once (S/N 7), appear in intra-ethnic or identity-driven exchanges. In S/N 3, the exclusive use of Berom (2 instances: “Berê nó hir à gya kin zoŋ ni fàt,fàt”) between traders signals in-group solidarity, reinforcing ethnic pride and cultural preservation. Similarly, in S/N 7, Igbo’s single use (“Adimma, kedu gi?”) during a phone conversation reflects solidarity to maintain ethnic bonds, aligning with the document’s note that minority languages surface in private or intra-ethnic contexts. S/N 10 uniquely combines in-group solidarity and inter-group integration, with Berom (1 instance: “Nwanj a zwan a kyem nè nye”) asserting ethnic identity and Pidgin (1 instance: “No be chochocho!”) ensuring broader accessibility. This interplay highlights traders’ linguistic dexterity, balancing cultural affirmation with economic pragmatism. The lower frequency of Berom and Igbo compared to Pidgin, Hausa, and English underscores their specialised role in solidarity, used selectively to mark identity rather than dominate transactions.

The frequency distribution, with Pidgin and Hausa each appearing 6 times and English 5 times, reflects their prominence as integrative tools, facilitating inclusive communication in a multilingual marketplace. In contrast, Berom’s 3 uses and Igbo’s 1 use highlight their targeted application in solidarity contexts, affirming ethnic identity in specific interactions. The strategic code-switching across interactions, such as in S/N 9 where English (one instance), Pidgin (1 instance), and Hausa (1 instance) combine to maximise audience reach, illustrates how traders navigate complex social dynamics. This aligns with SIT’s emphasis on language as a marker of group membership, whether integrating for economic reach (e.g., Pidgin and Hausa’s frequent use) or solidifying in-group identity (e.g., Berom and Igbo’s selective use). The findings highlight traders’ pragmatic adaptability, leveraging their multilingual repertoires to foster peaceful coexistence and drive economic success. By applying SIT, this study extends the theory’s relevance to a Northern Nigerian market, addressing a research gap by providing micro-ecological insights into the Middle Belt’s linguistic landscape. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that language choice in Bukuru Metropolis is a dynamic, purposeful process, reflecting broader sociolinguistic realities of multiculturalism, identity negotiation, and economic agency, and reinforcing the critical role of group identity in sustaining social and commercial interactions in a diverse urban setting.

Conclusion

This study concludes that language choice among traders in Bukuru Metropolis, Jos, Plateau State, is a deliberate and strategic sociolinguistic practice that reflects the region’s rich multilingual landscape. Traders employ a dynamic interplay of in-group solidarity and inter-group integration, as outlined in Henri Tajfel and John Turner’s Social Identity Theory, to navigate the complexities of social and economic

interactions. By selecting from their linguistic repertoires, including Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, English, Igbo, and Berom, traders achieve goals such as fostering group affiliation, asserting ethnic identity, and enhancing transactional efficiency. The findings underscore the pivotal role of group identity in sustaining peaceful coexistence and driving socio-economic success in a diverse urban marketplace. Language, in this context, serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a powerful instrument for identity negotiation, cultural preservation, and economic agency, reflecting broader sociolinguistic realities of multiculturalism in Bukuru, Plateau State.

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