

# **LANGUAGE CHOICE IN MULTILINGUAL ENVIRONMENTS: A STUDY OF ZURU COMMUNITY OF KEBBI STATE, NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a study of Language Choice in multilingual Zuru community of Kebbi State, Nigeria. It explores social interactions in a setting fraught with socio-political complexities, where participants cannot rely on a single inter-personal identification, but must instead navigate among various language options, all of which come loaded with social expectations and biases. The questionnaire and interview methods were used to elicit response from the respondents. The findings revealed that identity negotiation depends on various factors like the domain of interaction, the topic or purpose of discourse and the status of the interlocutors.

## **Introduction**

This paper is a sociolinguistic study of language use in multilingual Zuru community in Kebbi State, Nigeria. It is aimed at exploring the process by which speakers sustain interactions through the choice they make among the available languages in this setting. The paper explores social interactions in a setting fraught with socio-political complexities, where participants cannot rely on a single interpersonal identification, but must instead navigate among various language options, all of which come loaded with social expectations and biases.

## **Brief Historical Background of Zuru People of Kebbi State**

Zuru is the headquarters of Zuru Local Government of Kebbi State. The inhabitants of this town and the surrounding villages are usually referred to as Dakarkari. However, historical sources argue that several groups like Kalawa, Lilawa and Bangawa and even Hausa came together to form this town, hence the multilingual nature of the settlement. According to Regnier, (3) Zuru Local Government is sub-divided into three districts: Zuru, Dabai and Fakai. According to this source, often in the past, anthropologists described the indigenous people of this area as Dakarkari. However, among this dominant group are the Fakai people considered as sub-group of Dakarkari and the Bangawa. This source argues that the Fakai, the Dakarkari (Lela), and the Bangawa (Lyase) are three distinct language groups. Their languages, along with the Duka languages belong to the Northern group of the Kainji branch of the Benue-Congo sub-family.

Similarly, Dettweiler and Dettweiler (3) assert that the indigenous people of Zuru and its environs; which include Danko-wasagu L.G.A, Sakaba L.G.A. and the Northern part of Rijau L.G.A. in Niger state are Lela speaking. However, while the Hausas refer to them as Dakarkari, they refer to themselves and their language as Lela. Grimes (320) describes the language under the heading Lela and gives Lalawa, Clela, Kolela, Cala-cala, Chilela and Chilala as alternate names to this. Regarding the origin of the Lela people before their present location in Zuru, (Harris, 116) suggests that they along with the Bangawa, the Kelawa and the Dukawa were a subject people in the Kingdom of Kebbi, which reached the height of its power in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The “Dakarkari” (i.e. Bangawa, Kelawa and Lela) are said to have been the “foot soldiers” of the king of Kebbi, from which occupation they obtained their Hausa name (Gunn and Conart 32). Around 1700, the Hausa peoples of Zamfara and Gobir rebelled against their Kebbi overlords and separated from the Kingdom of Kebbi. Harris argues that it is likely that the subject peoples, still loyal to Kebbi but wanting to farm undisturbed by the continual internecine

warfare of the Hausas, migrated southwards to set up a small buffer state. He identifies the Bangawa and the Kelawa as originating from an area near the Kebbi River and the Lela, coming from further east, as “The Zamfara Element” of the buffer state (Harris, 114). In view of this historical antecedent, it is clear that the Zuru people had always been multilingual having migrated with Hausas over a long period and yet still retain their indigenous languages. Therefore, their warlike disposition, the several encounters they had with other groups, particularly the Hausas and their constant migration have seemingly contributed to their multilingual nature.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **Language Choice in Multilingual Contexts**

Muaka (2021) argues that language is inevitably at the centre of identity construction in multilingual contexts where language choices have to be made. This is so where individuals have to negotiate their identity through their language choice. According to Muaka, Gumperz's (1982) study helped to contextualize how speakers construct identity in bi/multilingual situations. In this work, he shows how the we-code and they-code represent an individual's group identity in relation to others. He further stresses that the we-code represents the speaker's variety as being informal, familiar and proximal in terms of social distance. In multilingual setting, this code would be the local language. The other people's code which is the code denotes unfamiliarity, formal and social distance. In essence therefore, each language uniquely fulfils certain roles and represents certain identities, and all of them complement one another to serve the complex communicative demands of a pluralistic society (Vershik, 2004). Nkwain (2012) and Hymes (1968), on the other hand submit that language choice in complex multilingual speech

communities for each speech event can be difficult given the complexity in the acquisition patterns, the domains of use and other deciding factors. Therefore, extra-linguistic correlates such as participants, the locale, the topic, the setting, role relations, the tone, the intention and pressure from parents can be held accountable for the choice of a code in such a multilingual setting.

Pavlenko and Blackledge (2003) argue that identity is a dialogic phenomenon, constantly open to construction and re-evaluation within and through communicative interaction. Instead of seeking fixed identities underlying discourse strategy, they call for the examination of identity as a narrative emerging through language – or, more specifically, as a ‘fragmented’, decentred, and shifting narrative, resulting from the complexities of multilingual contexts. They therefore reframe the sociolinguistic project to explore the negotiation of identity as it plays out in language choices. They further question the range of linguistic maneuvers currently considered examples of identity negotiation. To the discourse level of choices of code-switching and code-mixing, they provocatively add further options, including the use of new linguistic varieties, the deployment of new rhetorical strategies (arguably a form of code-mixing), the learning of a second language, and the creation of identity narratives (i.e. stories one tells about oneself). Therefore, to Pavlenko and Blackledge the interplays of language, narrative and power imperfectly structure the deployment and viability of the different identities individuals would assume.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research has adopted Giles’ (1977) accommodation theory because it is socially diagnostic and lays emphasis on effective communication in complex multiethnic and multilingual

communities. Furthermore, it is concerned with the way language users perceive and respond to language in such communities.

Accommodation theory is a powerful attempt to explain the courses of choice and it is paralleled by an approach within sociolinguistics. The theory is interested in the specific motivations that may encourage individual speakers to adopt certain language varieties. Accommodation is regarded as a general phenomenon, applying in both monolingual and multilingual communities. The theory is a bundle of principles that are intended to characterize the strategies speakers use to establish, context or maintain relationships through talk. Regardless of its scope accommodation theory rests on one pivotal process: attunement. The idea is that we all tailor, or attune our behaviours according to the interaction and this process of attunement involves a range of communicative behaviours like language choice in interaction. Attunement renders the addressee(s) as equally important as the speaker and it also presents communicative behaviours as elements in a dynamic system. Speakers may undertake convergence or divergence consciously, but it is important to note that accommodation may occur well beyond the speaker's level of conscious awareness. It tends to suggest that one's language behavior shows that one associates other social and interactional benefits with speaking like the different groups of people one moves in and out of.

The theory allows for the possibility of an interaction in which one person converges and the other person diverges, which shows how complicated and important people's attitudes towards others are and how these attitudes can play out in language choice. The theory can also reveal aspects of the structure of a speech community that a linguist may have taken for granted. The theory equally stresses the importance of speaker's attitudes to their addressee, and the resulting

dynamism in interactions. The theory provides us with a context for comparing what speakers think they are doing with what they actually are doing.

### **Method of Data Collection**

The study took the researcher to Zuru town to physically observe the language situation and collect data. Collecting data through written questionnaires is an established method in other social scientific fields and has a long history in dialect geography (Milroy and Gordon, 2003). Interviews have also been regarded as one of the most common approach to data collection among sociolinguists.

The research methodology adopted for this study is survey method. This sample survey method is adopted through the use of structural questionnaire. The questionnaire is directed at respondents who are literate while structured and unstructured interview are directed at the illiterate members of the population of the study. Each questionnaire solicits information on age, sex, level of education and occupation. Other questions include other languages spoken apart from the mother tongue, how those languages are acquired, where and when they are used and what factors influence the choice of any of the languages.

### **Sample Size**

About 200 respondents were randomly selected across social strata like age, sex, occupation and educational level in the setting. The researcher settled for 200 respondents in anticipation of those who might not cooperate. This sample size was arrived at in view of the fact that the respondents inhabit similar environment, their characteristics are largely the same and their exposure are likely to be similar.

## **The Survey**

In the community, the researcher was accompanied by informants who are natives to the field of interview. The interview was helpful in the sense that it complemented the questionnaire.

## **Analytical Procedure**

Two hundred questionnaires were processed in three stages, namely coding, data presentation and data analysis. The coding was carried out by giving numerical value to respondents' answers. The data was analyzed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). The analysis was based largely on frequency and percentage distribution.

Tables were used to elucidate the data. There are three columns in each table. The first column deals with the number of respondents. The second column deals with the frequency of occurrence while the third column is concerned with the value as expressed in percentage.

## **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The analysis presented here was done using the frequency and percentage analysis method which is prevalent with researches in social sciences. This was adopted to get the necessary information that would lead to a meaningful conclusion. Although, 200 copies of the questionnaire were administered in the community and 190 was returned.

### **Question 1: How many languages do you speak apart from your mother tongue?**

The responses to the above question revealed that many respondents of the community had at least a working knowledge of one language in addition to their mother tongue as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents According to Number of Languages Spoken in Zuru**

<b>Response (No of Languages)</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
1	17	8.9
2	117	61.6
3	47	24.7
4 and above	9	4.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2015

From Table 1, 17 out of 190 respondents representing 8.9% claimed to speak only one language in addition to C'lela. A great number of the respondents in Zuru to be precise 117 representing 61.6% of the total number of respondents agreed they could speak 2 other languages in addition to their mother tongue. On the other hand, 47 and 9 respondents which represent 24.7% and 4.7% respectively laid claim to be able to speak between 3 and 4 languages. This shows clear evidence of multilingualism in this setting.

#### **Question 2: What is the language combination?**

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents According to Language Combination in Zuru Town**

<b>Response (Language combination)</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Hausa/English	133	70.0
Hausa/Dukanci	14	7.4
Hausa/Others	19	10.0
English/Others	24	12.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2015



Table 2 indicates that in Zuru 133 out of 190 respondents which represents 70% of the population of study claimed to combine Hausa and English in addition to C’lela the mother tongue, 14 respondents agreed that they combined Hausa and Dukanci, 19 of the respondents claimed they combined Hausa and other languages like Fulfulde, Nupe, Yoruba this represents 10%, while 24 respondents which account for 12.6% of the study population claimed to combine English and other Nigerian languages mentioned earlier.

### **Question 3: What language would you prefer to use for cultural discussion?**

This question is intended to elicit responses that will elucidate the preceeding discussion. It is assumed that speakers are likely to prefer the choice of their indigenous languages for cultural issues because certain cultural terms or beliefs are better expressed in the indigenous languages.

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents according to Preferred Language for Cultural Discussion in Zuru**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
C’lela	86	45.3
Hausa	56	29.5
Dukanci	4	2.1
English	21	11.0
Others	23	12.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2015

This table shows that higher number of speakers in Zuru also believed that they handled cultural discussion better in C’lela than other languages, thus 86 respondents representing 45.3% fell within this category. Hausa followed closely with 56 respondents which constituted 29.5%, English recorded 21 responses which was 11.0%, Dukanci 4 which

was 2.1%. Other speakers also agreed that they could discuss cultural issues in other languages like Fulfulde, Nupe, etc.

It can be inferred from Table 3 that sociolinguistic rules can constrain speakers to choose appropriate codes whether the domain of choice is relatively broad or restricted. For instance, in the above data it is revealed that greater percentage of respondents in Zuru believed that the appropriate language to discuss their cultural affairs was their mother-tongues i.e. C'lela. Therefore, when it comes to cultural issue C'lela is the preferred language.

**Question 4: In what language would you prefer to discuss matters like politics, economy and religion?**

This question is meant to determine the sociolinguistic claim that the more complex the topic, the greater the frequency of code-shifting.

**Table 4**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
C'lela	32	16.8
Hausa	58	39.5
Dukanci	0	0.0
English	96	50.5
Others	4	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2015

The picture in Zuru revealed that the other languages apart from Dukanci were highly competitive when it comes to political, economic and religious discourses. In this regard, English recorded 96 out of 190 respondents representing 50.5%, Hausa ranked next with 58 respondents agreeing they could handle political, economic and religious discussions

in the language. C'lela the mother tongue of the people came third with 32 respondents representing 16.8%. This shows that when it comes to politics, religion or economy, the preferred language is English followed closely by Hausa. This means that the inhabitants of Zuru town are willing to realize their political objective through either English or Hausa language rather than C'lela.

### **Discussion of Findings**

A careful consideration of the preceding data on language choice in Zuru and the analysis thereof which was aimed at determining language choice on the part of the individual speakers and the social and contextual variables constraining this choice, it is clear that the model adopted for this study recognizes that choice between or among alternate codes is prevalent in multilingual settings. This depends on the various factors in speech events.

In addition to the data collected through questionnaire, information was equally obtained through interaction on a number of communication situations both formal and informal, observation of language behaviour as it took place. In the process, the researcher became curious in any instance where a language other than the mother tongue was being used. This in turn led to a number of discussions about the contexts of use of other languages. It should be noted however, that it is not the aim of this study to completely predict code choices among the speakers of this community, which is the reason why more than one code can be employed in every communicative event.

In Zuru, the home domain has completely been taken over by Hausa language. In fact parents lament the rate at which Hausa language and culture is eroding their indigenous languages. Among adults in Zuru, Hausa and C'lela were predominantly used in the

home domain while office elicited a combination of Hausa, English and occasional C'lela depending on the other speaker(s). The church revealed more of C'lela and Hausa with occasional switch into English. The leisure period revealed that except where necessary, Hausa is the dominant language used particularly because Hausa is the only language that can accommodate other speakers within the communities that are non-native speakers of C'lela. The extent to which Hausa language has permeated the community can be demonstrated by the situation, in which a significant number of residents of the community believe they could even handle the affairs of their culture in Hausa language, see table 3.

From the findings, language choice in Zuru depends on the following:

- (a) The domain of interaction.
- (b) The topic or purpose of discourse.
- (c) The status of the co-interlocutors.

## **Conclusion**

It is revealed that language choice is constrained by many factors in Zuru. It is equally discovered that speakers do not employed the use of one language to discuss a particular issue at all times, hence, it changes depending on the situation and the need of the speakers.

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