

A Sociolinguistic Study of Language Use in Nigerian Online Communities: Code-Switching, Identity and Digital Interaction

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Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	
Citation: Chinwe Godwin Udom, & Cynthia Ifeoma Nwozor. (2026). A sociolinguistic study of language use in Nigerian online communities: Code-switching, identity and digital interaction. <i>UKR Journal of Education and Literature</i> , 2(4), 242-251.	<i>The current study seeks to examine the sociolinguistic features of Nigeria's online communities on Facebook, specifically focusing on code-switching, identity formation and communication on digital platforms. Adopting a qualitative approach, ten (10) Facebook messages and comments were purposefully selected for content, discourse and thematic analysis. Results reveal that the practice of code-switching among English, Nigerian Pidgin, Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa languages took place in 90% of selected data and constituted the predominant form of communication. Five major themes have emerged from the data: code-switching as social practice; language as identity formation; the creation of Nigerian Digital Vernacular (NDV); Pidgin as a source of solidarity and humour; and vernacular language as the means of counter-hegemonic politics. The current study reveals that Nigerians on Facebook use complex code-switching strategies that are reflective of their identities and social consciousness. It is suggested that Nigerian Pidgin be formally recognized as a language used in public communications; digital sociolinguistics be included into academic curriculums; and more studies on African digital multilingualism be undertaken.</i> Keywords: code-switching, sociolinguistics, digital communication, identity construction, language.

Introduction

Language is never an apolitical entity. It is inherently associated with issues of identity, social affiliation, history, and socio-cultural negotiations. Such problems are especially evident in relation to Nigeria – a state with one of the most multilingual socio-cultural settings in the world. More specifically, the fact that there are more than 500 different languages spoken in Nigeria makes it an interesting object of sociolinguistics research in which issues of who speaks which language, to whom, and in what situation become inseparable from questions of ethnicity, social standing, education, religion, and politics. In the times when digital technologies transform the way people communicate in this country, the need for understanding of these processes becomes particularly urgent. At the same time, the development of online communities provides researchers with additional opportunities for studying the role of language in contemporary Nigerian socio-cultural

space. The multilingual character of Nigeria is the result of a rather complex history. Namely, due to British colonial administration, English became the official language of the state. Thus, nowadays this language is used in government, education, legislation, and elite communications. However, in spite of the dominance of English, the system of Nigerian languages is rather complicated. Namely, besides English and apart from it, there is an extensive network of indigenous and contact languages, which plays an important role in the lives of the population. There are three major groups of ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria, namely Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, each having millions of speakers and great cultural importance within the regions where they operate. Also, there are hundreds of smaller indigenous languages, including Efik, Ijaw, Tiv, and Edo. Besides, there is another contact language of Nigeria – Nigerian Pidgin English, which emerged as a result of business

contacts in colonial period and has now become the most widely spread language of interethnic communication in Nigeria. Due to such linguistic setting, most Nigerians are multilingual from their early age. (Faraclas, 1996; Elugbe & Omamor, 1991).

The emergence of increased accessibility to social media in Nigeria within the last two decades has created a new context where multilingual proficiency constantly occurs. Nigeria at present is one of the most vibrant social media markets in Africa. According to DataReportal (2024), there were some 36 million social media users in Nigeria as of early 2024, which represents a significant growth year-on-year driven by increasing smartphone penetration rates and mobile internet coverage expansion. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (previously Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok play a vital role in everyday life of Nigerians, serving not only for leisure purposes but also for commercial, activist, information, political discussion, networking, and personal communication activities. Nigerian Twitter, specifically, gained international attention with the help of #EndSARS movement in 2020, thus proving the potential of digital platforms to engage language in social activism (Agbo *et al.*, 2021). On those platforms, the linguistic practices of Nigerians are characterized by great flexibility and creativity. In one WhatsApp message, a person may start from standard English, move to Nigerian Pidgin, and end up speaking Yoruba within a few sentences. The same happens with an Instagram post caption: one may combine Igbo language expressions, internet slang, and English into a text without clear demarcation between categories. Those everyday phenomena represent not the lack of linguistic competence but highly developed one, which sociolinguists describe as code-switching and translanguaging.

With respect to the rich sociolinguistics of Nigeria and its rapidly growing digital environment, research at the junction of the two areas is still relatively lacking. Most previous studies regarding Nigerian language practices have focused either on face-to-face contexts, print media, or institutional environments, such as education and law. While there is an increasing number of studies on African digital language use in general, the digital community in Nigeria has yet to be properly studied with a sociolinguistic lens in line with its size and vibrancy (Mabweazar *et al.*, 2014; Eisenlohr, 2018). Previous studies mostly focus on one platform and one particular phenomenon in digital environments, making broader questions concerning multilingualism and digital communication relatively untouched topics in sociolinguistics. This gap in sociolinguistic research becomes the main point of the current paper. (Adegbija, 1994; Bamgbose, 1998; Jowitt, 2019).

Definition of Related Terms

Code-switching is defined as a linguistic situation where a speaker switches from one language to another or from one variety to another within the same speech situation (Myers-Scotton, 1993).

Code-mixing, on the other hand, involves the mixing of linguistic units from different languages in the same utterance (Muysken, 2000).

Nigerian Pidgin English is a contact language which emerged along the West African coast during the colonial era as a language for trading and inter-ethnic communication (Elugbe & Omamor, 1991).

Lingua franca is a language used as a common language by speakers who have no language in common (Adegbija, 1994).

Identity is a socially constructed phenomenon that cannot be inherited but achieved by linguistic means (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Online community is a set of people who regularly interact with each other online for various reasons (Herring, 2007).

Sociolinguistics is the field of linguistics that studies language as it relates to the society. The effects of social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, class, and context on language use are among the issues studied in sociolinguistics (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015).

Empirical Review

A comparative assessment of linguistic practices on Nigerian digital platforms based on three studies brings out some common themes in relation to language use and code-switching in digital settings. Alege and Taiwo (2019) sought to investigate the patterns and motivations behind the choice of language in interactions of Nigerian Facebook users. Specifically, they concentrated on the interplay between English, Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages. The results revealed that language choice in interactions on Facebook is mainly motivated by the social effect one wants to achieve during interaction. Facebook users alternate between English and Nigerian Pidgin depending on the topic, audience and intention of the message. Humor, solidarity and ethnic affiliation were among the main drivers behind the choice of Nigerian Pidgin, while English was more preferred when making announcements or speaking formally. The research proves that language negotiation takes place in the process of choice of code among Nigerian Facebook users.

Ogunmodimu (2020) investigated the choice between English, which represents a prestigious language, and Nigerian Pidgin as a lingua franca in order to establish what language choices reflect in terms of the identity and

belonging among Nigerians who interact online. The author found out that code-switching in virtual settings is not an accidental phenomenon but a strategy used by individuals to communicate certain social meanings. Nigerian Pidgin was used to communicate the messages of informality, closeness and cultural identity, while English language was used for messages that needed authority or precision. The research shows that Pidgin language has ceased being a contact language and become a marker of pan-Nigerian identity in digital setting.

Iyanuoluwa and Oyinlade (2024) analyzed code-switching in Nigerian online comic skits to find out how code-switching is used for comedic and sociocultural purposes by content creators in this genre of digital entertainment. The authors' analysis covers linguistic, sociocultural and comedic aspects of code-switching in these skits. Code-switching by content creators among English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa languages is done to create comedy, create identification of the audience and make social commentary about life in Nigeria. Inter-sentential and intra-sentential switches are frequent in these skits. In addition, code-switching becomes a tool for engagement with the audience and societal advocacy in relation to socio-economic and political issues.

According to Adebayo *et al.*, (2025), language, identity and politics interplay within Nigerian online discourse via a sociolinguistic analysis of Nairaland, which is Nigeria's biggest Internet Forum. The study showed how Pidgin English and mixed languages are used to build up a sense of group identity or solidarity, especially when there is some protest or satire involved. Nigerian Pidgin allows people to be funny, sarcastic and emphasize while still maintaining their intelligibility. Moreover, the study showed gender aspects of political communication, where voices of women were often being silenced through labeling them as either sexist or from a lower social stratum. Code-switching between English, Pidgin, and ethnic languages was shown to be the means of bottom-up resistance and ethnic affirmation.

The use of language mixing in expressing identity in Nigerian digital discourse was investigated by Adeyanju (2018). The study showed that language mixing in Nigerian digital discourse is one of the most important ways of identity expression and allows users to index themselves not only locally (through an ethnic group affiliation) but also on a national scale (Nigerian) and globally (digital culture). Users who mix indigenous languages with English and Pidgin were called to perform "layered identities."

As noted in Nkem (2022), digital multilingualism was explored via research on the language practices on Facebook among Nigerians. The results of the study demonstrated that the language practices of Nigerian

Facebook users are highly multilingual, in terms of using English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa languages together in one post or discussion thread. The research revealed that the most important factors which predict the choice of a particular language include belonging to a certain group and the topic of discussion. Religious groups tend to use formal English, while entertainment communities prefer Pidgin and mixed vernacular language, and the highest frequency of intra-sentential code-switching was observed in trade groups.

Theoretical Framework

Code-Switching Theory by Gumperz

The Code-Switching Theory was coined by John J. Gumperz to address the linguistic phenomenon where multilingual speakers alternate between languages in their communication processes, along with their meanings. In particular, Gumperz (1982) states that the Code-Switching Theory involves the use of more than one language variety in communication interactions. The theory explains that multilingual speakers do not switch languages in a haphazard manner but rather for certain social and communicative reasons. There are two main types of code-switching as suggested by this theory. These include situational code-switching and metaphorical code-switching. Situational code-switching happens when changes in the environment and contexts necessitate the change to another language. On the other hand, metaphorical code-switching takes place when the language speaker switches languages to pass certain social meanings like humor, solidarity, identity, or emotive expressions. The theory applies in Nigeria since there is a lot of code-switching among languages including English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages.

Hymes' Ethnography of Communication Theory

The Ethnography of Communication Theory was developed by Dell Hymes as a way of studying the communication process within certain social and cultural settings. Hymes postulated that knowledge of language is not limited to grammar but also includes the capacity of a person to communicate effectively in different social settings (Hymes, 1974). Hymes put forth the idea of communicative competence, which is defined as the ability of a speaker to understand how language should be used in certain settings. Moreover, Hymes postulated the idea of SPEAKING model, which consists of the following aspects involved in the communication process. The aspects mentioned above make it possible to understand why communication varies from one social setting to another. This theory is applicable since the communication process in online groups in Nigeria happens in definite social settings.

Fishman's Domain Theory of Language Selection

Fishman's Domain Theory is a concept formulated by Joshua Fishman in order to illustrate language selection by individuals in accordance with particular social settings or domains. According to Fishman (1972), multilingual individuals do not select their languages in a random manner but depend on certain languages in accordance with the setting or the individuals involved in communication. The relevance of the theory lies in the fact that Nigerians online communication environments have different communication settings that determine the choice of languages by users. For instance, users may opt to communicate in English in formal settings while using Nigerian Pidgin and other indigenous languages in informal settings.

Methodology

The current research is based on qualitative research design. Population of this study comprises Nigerian users who participate in various forms of online community via facebook platform. The users in this context represent individuals coming from different socio-linguistic backgrounds who interact in the online setting using facebook platforms. Purposeful sampling technique was used in this study since it helped the researcher choose the data which was necessary for achieving the aims of the study. In this respect, five online interactions comprising posts and comments with sociolinguistic features such as code-switching and language variation were chosen. Primary source of data of this study included social media posts gathered from facebook. Data were collected using documentation technique in which the researcher documented relevant online interactions. Analysis of data involved three techniques namely content analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Through content analysis, the researcher was able to identify recurring patterns and linguistic features, discourse analysis involved investigation of the manner in which language was used in creating meanings and social relationships and thematic analysis was useful in organizing and interpreting themes related to language choice, identity expression and communication practices in Nigerian online communities.

Results And Discussions

Theme One: Code-Switching as a Prevalent Means of Communication

Amongst the many linguistic features identified in the ten data sets, the one that is most prevalent and dominant amongst them all is code-switching. This entails the phenomenon of using two or more languages in a particular communicative interaction. Code-Switching was found to occur in nine out of ten (90%) of the Facebook posts and comments analyzed, thereby establishing its importance as

a crucial feature in the communication system in Nigeria. Code-switching mainly occurs between English and Nigerian Pidgin language, and English and Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa language according to their region/ethnic group. The following are examples of the types of code-switching found:

Post 1 (English–Nigerian Pidgin Intersentential Switch):

"Bros, I don try everything wey dem talk for that group, e no work. The algorithm na pure wickedness.

I think say na to keep pushing we go do. No give up."

(Translation: "Bro, I have tried everything they discussed in that group, it did not work.

The algorithm is pure wickedness. I think we just have to keep pushing. Do not give up.")

Post 2 (English–Yoruba Intrasentential Switch):

"The meeting was productive sha. E ma worry, we go sort everything out before e reach igbà iròlè.

"(Translation: "The meeting was productive though. Do not worry, we will sort everything out before evening.")

Post 3 (English–Igbo Tag-Switching):

"This country is frustrating, abi? Ọ dị mma, we move. God dey."

(Translation: "This country is frustrating, right? It is fine, we move forward. God is there.")

These passages illustrate three main categories of code-switching: intersentential switching, intrasentential switching, and tag-switching. The results are consistent with Auer's (1999) sequential approach to code-switching, which postulates that code alternations are not random but are used for certain interactional and social purposes.

Furthermore, it was found that Nigerian Pidgin was the code switch partner to English in most cases. This result is in line with Faraclas's (1996) classification of Nigerian Pidgin as a lingua franca that can be used to bridge ethnic and linguistic differences in Nigeria. Pidgin served not just as an alternative linguistic tool but also as a way to mark one's identity in different online environments, which is supported by research of Ihemere (2006) and Nkemleke (2010).

Theme Two: Constructing and Expressing Identity Through Language Choice

The second important theme that was evident in the data analysis was that of language choice used in identity construction and expression. It became clear through the data analysis that the Nigerians on Facebook construct and express their identities through code switching and

language variation by way of ethnic, generational, professional, and pan-Nigerian or nationalist identity.

Post 4 (Ethnic Identity Signalling – Igbo Community Group):

"Ụmụ Igbo, let us not forget where we come from. The hustle is real but ihe ọ bụla ọma ga-adị. Keep pushing, ndi be anyi."

(Translation: "Children of Igbo, let us not forget where we come from. The hustle is real but

everything good will be. Keep pushing, our people.")

Post 5 (Professional Identity – Business/Entrepreneur Group):

"I just closed a 6-figure deal o! If you know, you know. Na hustle dey pay, my people.

Stay consistent, stay focused. The market is tough but we move."

Post 4 represents an example of a strategic use of Igbo phrases embedded in an English language post as an ethnic identity marker. Specifically, the incorporation of phrases such as Ụmụ Igbo (children of Igbo) and ndi be anyi (our people) builds an image of ethnic identity. This is in line with the theory of Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT) proposed by Giles (1977) and expanded by Bourhis and Giles (1977) according to which language choice is strongly connected with group identity.

On the other hand, Post 5 represents an example of another intentional identity building when the author identifies himself with the hustler identity, which is quite common for Nigerian digital culture. The combination of formal English vocabulary "6-figure deal", "consistent", "focused" with the Pidgin "o!", "Na hustle dey pay", "we move" creates a unique identity of the author that can be described as educated, experienced in business sphere and at the same time street-smart. This kind of identity creation can be described through Canagarajah's (2013) translanguaging practice concept.

Theme Three: Language Variation and Register Shifting

However, apart from code-switching, the data showed clear patterns of variation within language use, such as register switching, style switching, and non-standard orthography associated with computer mediated communication (CMC). This was particularly the case in Facebook chat comments, which have very different conventions of communication compared to the formal registers.

Post 6 (Register Shift and Abbreviation Use):

"LoL this country sha. But on a serious note, d situation is gettn worse everyday.

We need to talk abt these tins. Govt is not helping us at all. Smh."

Post 7 (Orthographic Deviation and Informal Style):

"Dat moment wen u hav tried ur best n ntn is working... God abeg. Pls somebody hug me.

Dis life sef."

Features of the orthography in Posts 6 and 7 which include phonetically respelled forms ("d" for "the", "u" for "you", "ntn" for "nothing"), abbreviations (SMH "shaking my head"; LoL "laugh out loud"), and truncation of vowels ("gettn", "abt") are typical features of CMC language which have been adapted to meet the challenges of the medium in which they occur. Crystal (2011) observes that this netspeak represents a valid and creative language system rather than a deviation from standard usage. The results confirm Tagliamonte & Denis's (2008) finding that digital language is a hybrid register incorporating characteristics of both speech and writing.

Notably, shift of register was also found in posts made by the same individual; some individuals used SNE register in their professionally-oriented posts but shifted to less formal code-mixed registers in social and emotionally-related situations. Shift of register is in agreement with the classical definition of situational switching by Blom & Gumperz (1972) versus metaphorical switching where switch in language use is determined by social and emotional factors within the same social situation.

Theme Four: Solidarity, Humour and Language

The fourth theme that emerged relates to the practical use of code switching and mixing for social cohesion, humour and community building. Various posts have used vernacular forms such as Pidgin for humor, closeness and even solidarity.

Post 8 (Humour and Pidgin Use):

"NEPA don take light again for the 4th time today. No current, no hustle.

Oya make we go beg generator. This country wey we dey sef."

(Translation: "The power company has taken the electricity again for the 4th time today.

No power, no work. Let us go beg the generator. This country we find ourselves in.")

Post 9 (Emotional Solidarity):

"E go better for us all my people. Just keep your head up.

The ones wey dem see finish, e still dey waka. God no go shame us."

(Translation: "Things will get better for all of us, my people. Just keep your head up.

Even what they have seen the end of, it still walks. God will not shame us.")

Humour in Post 8 arises as a result of a comparison between the daily experiences in Nigeria (which is power outage associated with NEPA, National Electric Power Authority, acronym that is still preserved despite the company's defunct nature) and the mood of stoical amusement, all presented in Nigerian Pidgin. Using the Pidgin language to convey the sense of the communal frustration and the way in which the speaker copes with it can be related to Bell's (1984) Audience Design Framework, according to which people stylistically adjust their language according to the listeners, in this case the Nigerian audience that understands the meaning of NEPA.

In Post 9, one can see the example of solidarity function of code-switching described by Mesthrie and Leap (2000). This post uses the religious undertones ("*God no go shame us*") that also reveal the widespread phenomenon of religious language in Nigerian public discourse.

Theme Five: Power, Resistance, and Political Discourse through Digital Language

The fifth and last theme relates to the use of language in political discourse, resistance, and commentary. Some of the posts included critiques on governance and socioeconomic conditions, among others, using language that incorporates both English and Pidgin or vernacular language to heighten the emotive power of their political arguments.

Post 10 (Political Commentary and Resistance):

"These leaders ehn. Na dem dey chop our money while we suffer for the street.

Dem no care about us small small people. But one day, table go turn. Soro soke!"

(Translation: "These leaders, they eat our money while we suffer on the streets.

They do not care about us ordinary people. But one day, the tables will turn. Speak up!")

The use of "chop our money" in post 10 represents a kind of political criticism that is firmly grounded in vernacular speech. The colloquial Nigerian term "chop," which stands for embezzlement of funds, has been borrowed for political purposes, and "soro soke" – the Yoruba idiom which means "raise your voice" became popular as a protest slogan in 2020 #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, thus proving that language on the internet both represents and constructs political awareness. This conclusion fits into the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) suggested by

Fairclough (1992, 2003), according to whom the language is a social practice which creates, maintains and reproduces relations of power. The use of Pidgin in political criticism instead of Standard English serves the purpose of democratization, and by making political speech vernacular, this practice makes it more accessible and emotionally charged for ordinary people, as opposed to the elitism of Standard English. It is in line with the idea of language as critical practice suggested by Pennycook (2007).

Conclusion

The current study aimed at examining language use in Nigerian Facebook communities with emphasis on code-switching, identity and digital communication. The results of the study confirm that code-switching should be seen as an evidence of bilingual competence and a socially driven phenomenon that is inherent to the multilingual context of Nigeria rather than a proof of inadequate language proficiency. Facebook users in Nigeria switch between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and ethnic languages to convey their identity, develop solidarity, express irony and challenge the political power. Thus, language use on Facebook can be treated as an aspect of identity performance when people construct different types of identity through the choice of codes including ethnic, occupational, generational and pan-Nigerian identities. In addition, the existence of Nigerian Digital Vernacular (NDV), i.e. the creative code-mixed register that has orthographic variants, abbreviations, and register mixing as its distinctive features, proves the existence of the specific communicative code that does not violate the rules of Standard English language. Thus, politically, the entextualization of the #EndSARS slogan "soro soke" into everyday Facebook communication demonstrates the role of digital language use as civic activism and counter-hegemony.

Recommendations

From the analysis, government agencies need to embrace multilingual digital communication techniques using Pidgin and important ethnic languages to enhance effectiveness and civic inclusion while universities ought to include digital sociolinguistics in the Linguistics and Language Education program for the preparation of students to be able to analyze and participate in the realities of multilingual digital communication in Nigeria. Also, social media companies operating in Nigeria should develop natural language processing techniques that take into consideration Nigerian Pidgin and code-mixed languages. Finally, Nigerian media companies need to increase the utilization of Pidgin and other local languages in their digital communication.

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