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The Role of Code-Switching and Multilingualism in Enhancing Business Transactions: A Case Study of Nakuru Town Open Air Market

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Abstract
Studies on language use in informal market spaces have largely examined language preferences and communication patterns without sufficiently interrogating how code-switching and multilingualism function as strategic socio-economic tools to facilitate business interactions. This paper examines the role of code-switching and multilingualism in enhancing business transactions at the Nakuru Town Open Air Market in Kenya. Specifically, the study examines how traders and clients use multiple languages to negotiate prices, establish rapport, overcome communication barriers, and foster inclusivity in a linguistically diverse commercial environment. The study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach involving interviews, participant observation, and audio-recorded interactions among traders and customers in the market. Data were collected from purposively selected multilingual participants comprising traders, customers, and market officials over a three-month period. The collected data were analysed thematically and through discourse analysis to examine patterns of language alternation and their communicative significance in transactional settings. Findings reveal that strategic code-switching between Kiswahili, English, and indigenous languages such as Gikuyu, Kalenjin, Dholuo, Ekegusii, and Luhyia plays a significant role in enhancing mutual understanding, building interpersonal trust, clarifying meaning, persuading customers, and strengthening commercial relationships. The study argues that multilingual practices in informal marketplaces are not merely communicative adaptations but also important socio-economic resources that facilitate trade and social cohesion in multilingual urban contexts. The paper contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by demonstrating how language choice and code-switching operate as dynamic tools of economic interaction and social negotiation in contemporary African marketplaces.

Key words: Business transactions, code-switching, informal markets, multilingualism, sociolinguistics.

INTRODUCTION

Communication challenges in multilingual marketplaces continue to shape the nature and effectiveness of business transactions in many urban centres in Kenya. In Nakuru Town Open Air Market, traders and customers from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds interact daily, making language choice an important factor in negotiation, persuasion, trust-building, and commercial success. Despite the growing multilingual character of Kenyan urban markets, limited scholarly attention has been given to how code-switching and multilingual practices function strategically to facilitate economic interactions within informal trading spaces. Existing studies have largely focused on language preference and general communication patterns without sufficiently examining how multilingual speakers alternate between languages to enhance transactional efficiency and social relations.

Nakuru Town Open Air Market, one of the largest and most vibrant informal markets in Kenya, provides an important setting for examining these linguistic dynamics. Located within a cosmopolitan urban environment, the market brings together speakers of Kiswahili, English, and several indigenous languages, including Gikuyu, Kalenjin, Dholuo, Ekegusii, and Luhyia. In such a setting, multilingualism serves not only as a communicative necessity but also as a socio-economic resource, enabling traders and customers to navigate culturally diverse interactions effectively (Akaeze et al., 2022; Barasa, 2023).

Nakuru's demographic composition brings together communities such as the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luo, Kisii, Luhya, and Somali, among others, making the town a reflection of Kenya's broader linguistic diversity. Although English and Kiswahili function as Kenya's official and national languages, respectively, indigenous languages remain widely spoken and often serve as the primary means of interpersonal communication among many citizens (Barasa, 2023; Kibui, 2014).

Within Nakuru Town Open Air Market, traders and clients navigate these multilingual realities daily, requiring them to shift flexibly between languages in order to sustain effective interaction. The ability to alternate between languages, sometimes several times within a single conversation, has become an important communicative strategy for enhancing transactional efficiency, maintaining interpersonal relationships, and expressing cultural affiliation (Akaeze et al., 2022).

Recent studies on language use in Kenyan marketplaces have focused on language preferences, language domains, and multilingual negotiation strategies in informal commercial settings (Barasa, 2023; Akaeze et al., 2022). However, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining code-switching as a deliberate, contextually employed transactional strategy in business interactions. Existing studies tend to generalise multilingual communication without adequately interrogating how specific language shifts are tactically deployed to negotiate prices, create familiarity, persuade clients, or manage social distance. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which linguistic versatility functions as social and economic capital in informal market economies (Kibui, 2014).

In Nakuru Town Open Air Market, communication extends beyond the simple exchange of information and operates as a tool of persuasion, negotiation, and relational management. A trader may initiate a conversation in Kiswahili, switch to Kikuyu to create ethnic solidarity, and later use English to project professionalism or social status. Each linguistic shift serves a distinct communicative and socio-economic purpose. Sociolinguistic studies indicate that code-switching may be situational, in which language changes according to participants or setting, or metaphorical, in which language shifts reflect changes in tone, topic, or social relationship (Barasa, 2023; Holmes, 2013). In open-air market contexts, both forms frequently co-occur, enhancing communicative effectiveness and supporting commercial outcomes.

Language choice within the marketplace is also deeply connected to socio-economic and cultural power relations. Traders frequently employ code-switching strategically to signal inclusivity, familiarity, authority, or social distance depending on their interpretation of a client's identity, ethnicity, or purchasing potential (Jagero & Odongo, 2018; Kibui, 2014). When a trader adopts a client's local language, the shift may communicate respect, solidarity, and trustworthiness.

Conversely, the use of an unfamiliar language may function to exclude, control information, or establish symbolic authority. In this context, language functions simultaneously as a bridge for social integration and as a mechanism of exclusion with direct implications for commercial interactions.

The gendered dimensions of multilingual communication are equally significant within market spaces. Female traders and clients often employ more nuanced linguistic strategies, including indirect speech, softer tones, and culturally coded expressions, to navigate social relationships and maintain harmonious interactions (Kimani et al., 2018). Research on urban language practices in Kenya demonstrates that women are more likely to utilise specific language codes associated with social integration, rapport-building, and relational diplomacy.

Language use in the marketplace is further shaped by broader historical and political processes. Colonial language policies that privileged English contributed to enduring hierarchies of linguistic prestige that continue to influence perceptions of language use in contemporary Kenyan public spaces (Reilly, 2019). Although Kiswahili has increasingly functioned as a national language associated with unity and interethnic communication, its role continues to intersect with English and indigenous languages, each carrying distinct symbolic and practical value. English is frequently associated with education, prestige, and professionalism, Kiswahili with inclusivity and national identity, and vernacular languages with ethnic solidarity and interpersonal trust (Kibui, 2014; (Reilly, 2019).

The socio-economic significance of language becomes particularly evident during negotiations involving prices, product quality, and customer loyalty. Traders often interpret linguistic cues as indicators of a client's educational background, bargaining ability, or economic status (Akaeze et al., 2022; Kibui, 2014). These practices align with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, in which competence in particular languages or speech forms confers social and economic advantage. In Nakuru Town Open Air Market, linguistic capital remains fluid, situational, and closely linked to the ability to code-switch appropriately.

Another important dimension of multilingualism in the marketplace concerns informal language acquisition and linguistic innovation. Many traders, particularly younger participants, acquire multilingual competencies through everyday social interaction rather than formal education. This environment has contributed to the emergence and widespread use of hybrid urban speech forms such as Sheng, which combines Kiswahili, English, and indigenous languages (Kihara, 2024). Sheng has become especially prominent among younger traders and customers as a marker of urban identity, modernity, and social belonging. Its continued use within commercial spaces demonstrates its communicative efficiency and socio-cultural relevance in contemporary urban Kenya (Barasa, 2023; Kihara, 2024).

Against this background, the present study examines how code-switching and multilingual practices function in business transactions at the Nakuru Town Open Air Market. The study seeks to understand the communicative strategies employed by traders and clients as well as the socio-economic, cultural, and historical factors shaping these linguistic behaviours. By situating language use within the dynamics of the informal economy, the study contributes to broader sociolinguistic scholarship on multilingualism, identity negotiation, linguistic capital, and economic interaction in contemporary African urban spaces.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two complementary sociolinguistic theories: the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) developed by Howard Giles et al (1973) and the Markedness Model advanced by Carol Myers-Scotton (1993). These frameworks are selected because they jointly explain both the interactional motivations and the social-structural logic underpinning language choice in multilingual settings such as Nakuru Town Open Air Market, a space characterised by linguistic diversity, cultural heterogeneity, and continuous economic negotiation.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) posits that speakers adjust their linguistic behavior in response to social and interpersonal goals, primarily through convergence or divergence. Convergence refers to the adaptation of speech patterns toward those of an interlocutor to reduce social distance and enhance rapport, while divergence emphasizes linguistic differentiation to assert identity or social boundaries (Giles et al., 2023).

In Nakuru Town Open Air Market, convergence may operate as a common linguistic strategy through which traders adjust their language choices to accommodate customers and facilitate interaction. Such accommodation may involve shifts among Kiswahili, Sheng and local vernaculars, depending on the interlocutor and communicative context. This interpretation is consistent with Otundo and Mühleisen (2022), who argue that multilingual speakers in Kenya switch between English, Kiswahili, Sheng and mother tongue for particular social and pragmatic purposes, with language choice reflecting interpersonal relationships, meaning, emotion, power and authority.

Conversely, divergence may occur in situations of conflict or perceived disrespect, where traders deliberately maintain linguistic distance to assert authority or protect social identity (Mseer, 2025). CAT therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how language functions as a dynamic interpersonal strategy in marketplace interactions. The theory underscores that code-switching may function as more than a communicative convenience; it can serve as a socio-pragmatic strategy through which speakers adjust their linguistic choices in response to interlocutors, negotiate social identities, signal affiliation and achieve particular communicative goals (Elhami, 2020).

However, CAT is limited in that it focuses primarily on interactional motivation at the micro level and does not sufficiently account for the broader socio-structural norms that govern language choice in multilingual societies. It explains how speakers adjust language in response to others but offers limited analytical depth regarding the institutionalized social meanings attached to specific codes in multilingual economies. This limitation necessitates a complementary framework. The Markedness Model addresses this gap by explaining language choice as a rational and socially indexed decision governed by expectations of appropriateness.

Myers-Scotton (1993) argues that speakers select between unmarked codes, which are socially expected in a given context, and marked codes, which carry additional social meaning. In Nakuru Town Open Air Market, Kiswahili typically functions as the unmarked code due to its role as Kenya's lingua franca and its neutrality in interethnic communication. Traders strategically shift to marked codes such as Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, or Dholuo to signal ethnic solidarity, intimacy, or persuasive intent, particularly in price negotiations and relationship-building (Jagero & Odongo, 2018; Erastus, 2024). The model therefore captures how language choice reflects deeper social indexing beyond immediate conversational adjustment.

Despite its explanatory value, the Markedness Model has limitations in its relative under-emphasis on real-time interactional negotiation and affective dimensions of speech. It tends to assume a rational calculation of linguistic choice, thereby overlooking spontaneous, emotionally driven, or unconscious shifts in code-switching behavior. Consequently, when applied in isolation, it risks presenting language use as overly deterministic and under-contextualized. The combination of CAT and the Markedness Model provides a more comprehensive analytical framework. CAT explains the interpersonal dynamics of convergence and divergence, while the Markedness Model clarifies the socio-symbolic logic guiding language selection within a structured multilingual environment. Together, they enable a multi-layered analysis of code-switching as both a relational strategy and a socially embedded practice.

Nevertheless, alternative frameworks such as Speech Accommodation Theory extensions, Interactional Sociolinguistics, or Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital could also have been considered. Bourdieu's framework, in particular, offers a more explicit political-economic explanation of language as symbolic capital.

However, CAT and the Markedness Model were preferred because they provide a more direct explanatory fit for real-time conversational dynamics and code-switching behavior in transactional market interactions, which is the primary focus of this study. In synthesis, the dual-theoretical approach adopted in this study allows for a nuanced understanding of how traders and clients in Nakuru Town Open Air Market use language strategically to negotiate identity, manage social relations, and achieve economic goals. It situates everyday linguistic practices within broader sociolinguistic and socio-economic structures, thereby contributing to scholarship on multilingualism in African informal economies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design to examine code-switching and multilingual practices in business transactions at the Nakuru Town Open Air Market in Kenya. The design was appropriate for capturing both observable interactional patterns and the socio-cultural meanings attached to language use in a multilingual informal economic setting (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study was conducted over a three-month period from January to March 2025.

The market was purposively selected due to its linguistic diversity and high intensity of trader-client interactions. A total of 60 participants were involved, comprising 35 traders and 25 clients selected through purposive sampling based on linguistic diversity, frequency of market engagement, and socio-demographic variation (Patton, 2015). Data were collected using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio recordings. Audio recordings were conducted with full informed consent from participants. A total of 20 trader-client conversations were recorded to capture authentic, real-time linguistic data during transactions. The recordings enabled the researcher to document phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic features of code-switching that might have been missed through observation alone. Such recordings are invaluable in discourse and conversation analysis as they provide permanent data for multiple layers of examination (Wong, 2020). Participant observation enabled the researcher to document naturalistic language use in real-time transactions.

Twenty trader-client interactions were audio-recorded with informed consent to capture authentic instances of code-switching. In addition, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions, motivations, and language choices in commercial interactions. This approach was consistent with the case-study methodology advocated by Baxter and Jack (2008), which emphasises examining phenomena within their real-life contexts and drawing on multiple sources of evidence to develop a comprehensive understanding of the case. This method was particularly useful in situating language use within its spatial and socio-economic environment.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and data from interviews and field notes were coded through open and axial coding to generate themes related to language choice, code-switching functions, identity negotiation, and economic interaction (Allsop et al., 2022; Salmons, 2024). Recent methodological discussions emphasize the importance of transparency and reflexivity in thematic analysis, while CAQDAS tools such as NVivo can facilitate the systematic organization, coding and retrieval of qualitative data (Lee et al., 2024; Salmons, 2024). Ethical approval was obtained from Laikipia University. Informed consent was secured from all participants, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation and pseudonymisation. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, in accordance with established ethical research standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that code-switching functions as a deeply embedded, strategic communicative practice among traders and clients at Nakuru Town Open Air Market. The findings affirm that the ability to fluidly navigate between Kiswahili, English, and various indigenous languages—including Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Luhya—is not merely a linguistic choice but a socio-economic imperative rooted in the market's culturally diverse interactions. This multilingual flexibility underpins several key themes that emerged during data analysis.

Code-Switching as a Rapport-Building Tool

One of the most prominent themes to emerge was the use of code-switching to establish rapport and foster social bonding between traders and clients. Many traders reported that switching to a client's native language during an interaction—especially in price negotiation—served to build trust and improve interpersonal relations. Clients reciprocated positively, noting that hearing their mother tongue in a commercial setting made them feel recognised, valued, and culturally affirmed. This aligns with recent studies showing that code-switching functions as a solidarity marker, particularly in multilingual and multicultural marketplaces (Ahmed, 2024; Kipchoge, 2024).

In Nakuru's market, linguistic alignment with a customer's ethnic background often softened negotiation stances and enhanced the likelihood of a sale. Traders intentionally leveraged this dynamism to foster customer loyalty and repeat business, thereby confirming the social capital of language (Erastus, 2024).

The study established that code-switching is a pervasive and institutionally normalised communicative practice within Nakuru Town Open Air Market. Across observations, interviews, and recorded interactions, traders and clients consistently alternated between Kiswahili, English, and indigenous languages such as Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya, and Dholuo. This linguistic behaviour was observed in greeting sequences, bargaining exchanges, product explanations, and transaction closures, indicating that multilingual switching is structurally embedded in market communication rather than incidental.

A trader described the everyday nature of this practice by noting:

"Hapa soko huwezi tumia lugha moja tu. Ukiona mteja unajaribu Kiswahili kwanza, kama anaelewa unabadilisha haraka."

(In this market, you cannot use only one language. When you meet a customer, you first try Kiswahili, and if they understand, you quickly switch). (P12, Trader).

Another client similarly observed:

"Ukiongea lugha yangu hata kama ni kidogo, naona unaniheshimu na hiyo inabadilisha hata bei kidogo."

(When you speak my language, even just a little, I feel that you respect me, and that can even slightly influence the price) (P07, Client).

These accounts indicate that language choice is not random or incidental within the marketplace environment, but rather a consciously monitored and strategically manipulated communicative resource.

Traders constantly assess clients' linguistic preferences, ethnic identity, tone, and level of familiarity before selecting the most appropriate language or combination of languages for interaction. Such linguistic adjustments are often made within seconds of initiating a conversation and are intended to create social closeness, minimise communicative barriers, and establish an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding.

The findings further suggest that successful negotiation in Nakuru Town Open Air Market is heavily dependent on traders' and clients' ability to navigate multilingual realities effectively. Participants repeatedly associated the use of familiar languages with honesty, friendliness, respect, and cultural recognition, all of which positively shaped bargaining processes and transactional outcomes. Conversely, inappropriate language selection or failure to linguistically accommodate a client occasionally generated suspicion, social distance, or reduced willingness to engage in prolonged negotiation. In this sense, language functions not merely as a medium for exchanging information about commodities and prices, but also as a socio-economic instrument through which interpersonal relationships, trustworthiness, and commercial advantage are continuously negotiated and reinforced within the marketplace setting.

Multilingualism Enhances Clarity and Avoids Ambiguity

The study further established that multilingualism serves a highly pragmatic communicative function, enhancing clarity and minimising semantic ambiguity during business transactions. This was particularly evident in negotiations over product descriptions, measurements, prices, and culturally specific commodities whose meanings could not be easily conveyed in a single language. Traders frequently alternated between Kiswahili, English, and indigenous languages to ensure that clients clearly understood the nature, quality, quantity, or use of a product before purchase. The findings indicate that multilingual communication reduced misunderstanding and increased transactional efficiency, especially in a marketplace characterised by diverse linguistic backgrounds.

One trader dealing in traditional vegetables explained:

"Kuna mboga zingine huwezi eleza vizuri kwa English. Wateja wa mashinani wanataka useme jina yao ya nyumbani."

(There are some vegetables you cannot explain properly in English. Customers from rural areas want you to mention their home-language names.) (P22, Trader).

Similarly, a trader selling herbal products stated:

"Ukisema kwa Kiswahili pekee wengine hawaelewi dawa ni ya nini. Lazima ubadilishe lugha kidogo."

(If you explain only in Kiswahili, some people do not understand what the medicine is for. You must change the language a little). (P15, Trader).

These responses demonstrate that multilingualism enables traders to communicate meanings that are culturally embedded and not always easily translatable into formal or standardised linguistic forms. Indigenous terminologies often carried experiential and cultural significance familiar to local customers, particularly elderly clients who were more accustomed to vernacular expressions than urban commercial language.

The findings further revealed that multilingual switching was especially useful when explaining pricing systems or units of measurement. In several observed interactions, traders repeated prices or quantities in different languages to avoid confusion and ensure transparency during bargaining.

A client noted:

"Wakati mwingine bei ikisemwa kwa English sielewi vizuri, lakini wakirudia kwa Kiswahili ama lugha yetu inakuwa clear."

(Sometimes when the price is stated in English I do not understand properly, but when they repeat it in Kiswahili or our language it becomes clear). (P09, Client).

Another participant observed:

"Kuna maneno ya sokoni watu wanaelewa tu kwa lugha zao. Ukitumia lugha moja unaweza poteza mteja."

(There are market expressions people only understand in their own languages. If you use only one language, you can lose a customer). (P27, Trader).

The study also established that multilingualism was particularly beneficial when interacting with elderly customers, rural migrants, or individuals with limited formal education who occasionally struggled with English-dominated communication. In such situations, traders deliberately simplified explanations by reverting to Kiswahili or indigenous languages familiar to the client. This linguistic accommodation minimised misunderstanding and facilitated smoother transactions.

These findings suggest that multilingualism in Nakuru Town Open Air Market extends beyond social interaction and identity negotiation to perform an essential cognitive and transactional function.

Language switching enables traders and clients to bridge communicative gaps, negotiate meaning collaboratively, and achieve transactional accuracy within a highly diverse commercial environment. This observation resonates with recent studies on African multilingual marketplaces, which argue that multilingual practices enhance comprehension, facilitate inclusion, and support efficient economic exchange in linguistically heterogeneous settings (Ahmed, 2024; Erastus, 2024; Kipchoge, 2024).

Strategic Language Use for Persuasion and Marketing

Another important finding of the study was the deliberate and strategic deployment of language for persuasion, customer attraction, and market positioning. Traders demonstrated a high level of linguistic awareness and adaptability, frequently modifying their language choices according to the perceived socio-economic background, age, ethnicity, or purchasing potential of clients. The findings revealed that language was not used merely for communication, but also as a persuasive commercial resource capable of influencing customer perception, trust, and purchasing behaviour.

English was commonly employed when traders interacted with middle-class, educated, or non-local customers. Participants indicated that speaking English projected sophistication, professionalism, and product credibility, particularly in transactions involving electronics, imported commodities, cosmetics, or high-value goods.

One trader explained:

"Ukiongea English vizuri, mteja anaona biashara yako iko standard fulani."

(When you speak good English, the customer feels that your business has a certain standard) (P08, Trader).

Another trader similarly observed:

"Wateja wengine wakisikia English wanakuamini haraka kwa sababu wanaona uko professiona"

(Some customers trust you quickly when they hear English because they think you are professional) (P21, Trader).

These responses indicate that English carried symbolic prestige within the marketplace and was often associated with education, quality assurance, and legitimacy. In this context, language functioned as a marketing strategy through which traders attempted to elevate the perceived value of their products and services.

Conversely, Kiswahili and indigenous languages were predominantly used when dealing with local customers, elderly clients, or lower-income buyers. Participants explained that using familiar languages created a relaxed atmosphere that encouraged customers to negotiate more freely and to engage socially with traders.

One participant remarked:

"Kiswahili inafanya mteja ajisikie ako mahali yake. Hata mazungumzo inakuwa rahisi."

(Kiswahili makes the customer feel comfortable and at home. Even the conversation becomes easier). (P13, Trader).

Another trader stated:

"Ukiongea lugha ya mtu anakua friendly zaidi na hata anaweza kurudi tena."

(When you speak someone's language, they become friendlier and may even return again). (P04, Trader).

The findings further revealed that traders intentionally alternated between languages within a single interaction depending on the direction of negotiation. For example, some traders-initiated conversations in English to establish professionalism before shifting to Kiswahili or vernacular languages to build familiarity and emotional connection during bargaining. This fluid movement between languages was highly calculated and reflected an acute awareness of market segmentation and customer psychology.

An observed interaction recorded during fieldwork captured a trader beginning with formal English while introducing a product before later shifting into Kiswahili during price negotiation:

"Madam, this product is very durable and original… *lakini bei tunaweza ongea vizuri usijali*."

(Madam, this product is very durable and original… but we can discuss the price properly, do not worry) (Observed Interaction 6).

This strategic alternation between formal and informal linguistic codes enabled traders to balance authority, professionalism, familiarity, and persuasion within the same transactional encounter.The findings therefore demonstrate that language choice in Nakuru Town Open Air Market is deeply intertwined with economic strategy and customer management.

Traders actively commodify linguistic resources, selecting particular languages to maximise sales, retain clients, and enhance competitiveness within the highly dynamic market environment. Such findings resonate with recent sociolinguistic scholarship on linguistic commodification, which argues that language increasingly functions as a marketable economic resource in multilingual commercial spaces (Ahmed, 2024; Erastus, 2024). The data further confirm that code-switching in urban African marketplaces is not accidental or unconscious, but rather a deliberate communicative strategy shaped by socio-economic considerations, consumer profiling, and transactional objectives (Kipchoge, 2024).

Code-Switching and Power Dynamics

The findings further reveal that although code-switching in Nakuru Town Open Air Market is predominantly oriented toward cooperation, inclusion, and transactional efficiency, it can also function as a subtle instrument of power and control within commercial interactions. In a limited number of cases, traders acknowledged the deliberate use of less familiar or ethnically exclusive languages during tense bargaining situations, particularly when negotiations became prolonged, confrontational, or uncertain. In such instances, language was not merely a communicative tool but a strategic resource used to regulate information flow, influence negotiation direction, and occasionally unsettle clients.

One trader candidly observed:

"Kuna wakati mteja anakuwa mgumu sana, unatumia lugha ambayo haelewi kidogo ili ajiulize mara mbili."

(There are moments when a customer becomes very difficult, and you use a language they do not fully understand so that they reconsider) (P17, Trader).

This response suggests that linguistic exclusion can be tactically deployed to introduce uncertainty into the negotiation process, thereby shifting bargaining advantage toward the trader. In such contexts, language choice becomes a mechanism for controlling comprehension and managing the pace and direction of commercial exchange. However, clients strongly resisted and critically interpreted such practices.

A client expressed discomfort with exclusionary language use:

"Ukianza kuongea lugha nisiyoelewa vizuri nahisi kama kuna kitu unaficha."

(When you start speaking a language I do not understand well, I feel like you are hiding something) (P06, Client).

This reaction demonstrates that linguistic exclusion is closely associated with distrust and perceived manipulation. As a result, such strategies risk undermining the very relational trust that sustains long-term trading relationships in the market.

The findings further indicate that these power-oriented uses of code-switching were not dominant within the broader communicative ecology of the market. Instead, they appeared as situational exceptions rather than normative practice. Most participants emphasised transparency, mutual understanding, and linguistic accommodation as essential to sustaining repeat transactions and maintaining customer loyalty. This suggests the existence of an informal but widely recognised ethical norm governing language use in marketplace interactions.

A trader summarised this expectation succinctly:

"Biashara nzuri ni ile mteja anaelewa kila kitu. Ukianza kuficha lugha unapoteza mteja."

(Good business is when the customer understands everything. If you start hiding behind language, you lose the customer (P10, Trader).

Overall, the findings suggest that while language can function as a tool of asymmetrical power in negotiation, its effectiveness is constrained by broader social expectations of fairness and trust. In Nakuru Town Open Air Market, economic survival is closely tied to maintaining long-term relational networks, which discourages sustained use of exclusionary or manipulative linguistic strategies.

Multilingualism as a Survival Strategy

The findings reveal that multilingual competence functions as a critical survival strategy, particularly among itinerant and cross-border traders operating within and beyond Nakuru Town Open Air Market. For this category of traders, language proficiency is not merely an added communicative advantage but a necessary condition for sustaining commercial mobility across ethnically and linguistically diverse regions. Participants consistently reported that the ability to communicate in multiple languages enabled them to establish new customer networks, negotiate effectively in unfamiliar environments, and maintain continuity of trade across different markets.

One itinerant trader explained:

"Nimejifunza lugha kama nne kwa sababu ya biashara. Ukienda sehemu mpya lazima ujue jinsi ya kuzungumza na watu wao."

(I have learned about four languages because of business. When you go to a new place, you must know how to speak with their people). (P14, Trader).

This account demonstrates that multilingualism is closely linked to economic mobility and market expansion. Traders with broader linguistic repertoires could transcend ethnic boundaries and operate across multiple commercial networks, thereby increasing their competitiveness and customer reach.

The findings further indicate that multilingualism also functions as an adaptive learning process embedded in everyday trade interactions. Traders reported acquiring new languages informally through repeated exposure, imitation, and social interaction with clients and fellow traders, rather than through formal instruction. This reflects the dynamic and experiential nature of language acquisition in informal economic settings.

A trader noted:

"Hizi lugha zote nimejifunza sokoni, si shule. Ukikaa na watu unazoea tu polepole."

(I have learned all these languages in the market, not in school. When you stay with people, you gradually get used to them). (P11, Trader).

This reinforces the view that multilingualism in the marketplace is an emergent skill shaped by necessity, interaction, and economic pressure rather than formal education systems. Overall, the study affirms that code-switching and multilingualism in Nakuru Town Open Air Market extend beyond communicative convenience to constitute deeply embedded socio-economic and cultural practices. Language operates as a bridge across ethnic and social boundaries, facilitating not only efficient transactions but also social cohesion and cultural exchange. Within this environment, code-switching emerges simultaneously as a pragmatic strategy for negotiation and a symbolic resource for expressing identity, respect, and strategic positioning within the marketplace.

These findings are consistent with broader sociolinguistic research in African multilingual markets, which highlights the centrality of linguistic versatility in enabling economic participation, enhancing social integration, and sustaining informal trade networks in linguistically diverse environments (Ahmed, 2024; Erastus, 2024; Kipchoge, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study affirms that code-switching and multilingualism constitute indispensable communicative resources within the socio-economic ecology of Nakuru Town Open Air Market. Traders and clients routinely draw on a linguistically diverse repertoire comprising Kiswahili, English, and indigenous languages such as Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya, and Dholuo to navigate the complexities of everyday commercial exchange. Rather than functioning as random or incidental shifts in speech, these linguistic practices are systematically embedded in the social organisation of market interactions and are consistently oriented toward achieving transactional efficiency, interpersonal alignment, and economic success.

The findings demonstrate that language choice plays a decisive role in shaping trust, negotiation outcomes, and customer relations. Traders strategically switch codes to establish rapport, signal respect, and construct social proximity with clients, particularly during bargaining sequences and product explanations. In many cases, the use of a client's mother tongue was reported to generate immediate feelings of recognition and trust, which, in turn, positively influenced willingness to purchase and the continuity of interaction. This confirms that language in the market context extends beyond its informational function to operate as a relational and affective resource embedded in economic exchange.

The study further reveals that multilingual communication significantly enhances transactional clarity and reduces misunderstanding across diverse participant categories. Elderly clients, rural migrants, and individuals with limited proficiency in English were found to rely heavily on Kiswahili or indigenous languages for comprehension and decision-making during purchases. Conversely, English was selectively deployed as a marker of professionalism, credibility, and socio-economic distinction, particularly in interactions involving perceived middle-class clientele or higher-value commodities. This differential deployment of languages underscores the strategic and context-sensitive nature of linguistic practice in the marketplace.

Importantly, the findings also highlight subtle yet meaningful power dynamics embedded in code-switching practices. While most linguistic exchanges were cooperative and oriented toward mutual understanding, occasional instances were identified in which language was used to create informational asymmetry or to assert negotiation advantage. Although such practices were not widespread and were often socially discouraged, they nonetheless demonstrate that language can function both as a mechanism of inclusion and as a potential instrument of control within commercial interactions. This duality reinforces the complexity of multilingualism as both a communicative and symbolic resource.

This study contributes to sociolinguistic understanding by demonstrating that language use in Nakuru Town Open Air Market is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, economic survival, and social negotiation. It shows that multilingual competence is not merely a communicative advantage but a practical necessity in linguistically diverse informal economies. The market thus operates as a microcosm of Kenya's broader linguistic landscape, where multilingualism facilitates not only trade but also social cohesion and cultural exchange.

Recommendations: Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the integration of multilingual practices in informal economic spaces, enhance communicative efficiency, and support inclusive language policy development.

First, it is recommended that training programs for traders in urban informal markets incorporate basic multilingual communication skills, particularly in Kiswahili and commonly used indigenous languages. Such training would not only improve transactional efficiency but also enhance customer relations by equipping traders with deliberate strategies for effective code-switching and culturally sensitive communication.

Second, language planning authorities and county-level trade development offices should recognise multilingualism as an economic asset rather than an informal deviation from standardised communication.

Policy frameworks should therefore acknowledge the functional role of indigenous languages in commerce and avoid overemphasis on English-only or Kiswahili-only transactional environments in informal markets. Third, civic education initiatives should be introduced to promote ethical communication practices in marketplace interactions. While code-switching is widely used for rapport-building, the study identified rare instances where language was used to create informational asymmetry. Strengthening awareness around transparent communication can help sustain trust and fairness in commercial exchanges.

Fourth, it is recommended that further research be conducted in other urban markets across Kenya to establish comparative insights into code-switching patterns across different linguistic ecologies. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of multilingualism in informal economies and to the development of broader sociolinguistic theory.

Finally, policymakers and urban planners should consider multilingualism when designing market communication systems, signage, and public information dissemination strategies. Incorporating multiple languages in official market communication structures would enhance inclusivity, accessibility, and participation for diverse user groups. These recommendations emphasise the need to reposition multilingualism as a central resource in economic planning, communication policy, and urban market development rather than treating it as a peripheral or informal linguistic phenomenon.

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