

Influence of Social Context on Code-Switching among Multilingual Speakers in the Kenyan Marketplace Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of social context on code-switching (CS) among multilingual speakers in Kenyan marketplaces, with a specific focus on interactions in mid-sized markets in Bungoma County. While CS has been widely examined in global and African sociolinguistic scholarship, existing research has not sufficiently explored how moment-to-moment social variables shape switching patterns within naturally occurring commercial encounters. This study addresses that gap by integrating insights from Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model and Gumperz's Interactional Sociolinguistics to examine CS as both a strategic and interactional practice. Anchored in an interpretive paradigm, the research employs a qualitative, discourse-analytic ethnographic design to capture naturalistic data in authentic marketplace interactions. Purposive and convenience sampling are used to select bilingual sellers and their interactions with customers. Data collection relies on audio recordings of spontaneous buying-selling exchanges, supplemented by stimulated recall interviews, field notes, and brief demographic questionnaires. These methods enable triangulation and access to both the observable linguistic behavior and participants' insider perspectives on their language choices. Data analysis follows a systematic, iterative process involving transcription, coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation. Code-switches are identified and classified by type, and their relationship to social context variables—such as negotiation phases, participant familiarity, and perceived customer status—is examined. Communicative functions, including referential, persuasive, directive, and expressive uses, are analyzed through both thematic coding and close discourse analysis. This combined approach illuminates how CS functions as a contextualization cue that shapes and reflects the unfolding dynamics of commercial interactions. Code-switching is systematic and socially motivated. It is not random but strategically deployed to achieve transactional and relational goals. The study found out that language choice indexes power and solidarity. Sellers use English to assert authority and local languages to foster community ties. Different phases of buying–selling interactions demand different linguistic resources. With regard to identity construction, speakers perform multiple identities through code-switching, balancing modernity (English) with cultural authenticity (Lubukusu/Kiswahili). In general, market discourse reflects broader sociolinguistic realities by blending of languages in everyday transactions mirrors Kenya's multilingual ecology and the coexistence of global and local identities.

Key Words: Code-switching, Multilingualism, Social Context, Kenyan Commercial discourse

INTRODUCTION

Language is not just a tool for communication but also a reflection of our identity and social lives. In Kenya, language use is especially interesting because many people grow up speaking more than one language. This bilingual or multilingual ability is particularly visible in urban markets and trading centers where diverse communities meet daily. The act of switching between languages mid-conversation—what linguists call code-switching—happens naturally and frequently in these spaces. In the bustling marketplaces of Kenya, like those in Nairobi, Kisumu, or Mombasa, people switch between Kiswahili, English, and local languages such as Kikuyu, Luo, or Luhya. This switching isn't random but reflects the social realities and relationships of the speakers. For example, a seller might use English when addressing a tourist but switch to Kiswahili or a local language when talking to regular customers. Code-switching can signal friendliness, assert authority, negotiate prices, or clarify meanings depending on who is involved and the context of the interaction. Researchers worldwide have shown that code-switching reveals a lot about power dynamics, social identity, and group

membership. However, in Kenya, while there are studies on bilingualism, not many focus in-depth on code-switching within specific social settings like buying and selling, which is central to everyday interactions for a large section of society. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how social context shapes the patterns and roles of code-switching in market discourse. It will help us understand how bilingual speakers use language not just to exchange goods but also to negotiate social relationships.

While code-switching is a well-documented phenomenon among bilinguals, its use is deeply tied to context, especially in places where different social groups meet and interact. One of the places where this interaction is most dynamic is commercial spaces like markets. Despite this, the link between social context and code-switching patterns in Kenya's buying and selling settings has not been sufficiently studied. In everyday life, buying and selling go beyond simple exchange—they involve persuasion, trust-building, conflict resolution, and social bonding. However, it remains unclear how these social factors influence when, why, and how bilingual speakers switch languages. For instance, do sellers switch languages to appeal to customers' preferences or to assert their authority? Does the social status of the buyer or seller affect the choice of language? And importantly, how do these switches affect communication efficiency and the overall trading experience? These questions highlight a research gap. Without deeper insight, we risk simplifying bilingual communication as just mixing languages rather than appreciating the complexity of interaction. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating code-switching specifically in buying and selling discourse, linking language choice to social context in real market environments.

This study focused on the buying and selling conversations among bilingual speakers, aiming to: a) Identifying the common code-switching patterns that emerge in market interactions; b) establishing how social variables influence language switching; c) Analyzing the communicative functions served by code-switching in these commercial settings; and d) Showing how code-switching reflects broader social and cultural norms within Kenyan bilingual communities.

Understanding how bilinguals use language in everyday commercial interactions has several benefits. First, it enriches academic knowledge of sociolinguistics and bilingualism by focusing on a vital but under-researched aspect of Kenyan communication. The study's findings could provide evidence to support bilingual education policies that recognize the fluidity of language use rather than rigid separation. Moreover, market interactions are critical to social cohesion and economic life in Kenya. Insights into code-switching can help improve communication strategies for traders, customers, and even policymakers interested in promoting effective and inclusive interactions. Finally, this research adds a human dimension to the study of language by showing how people naturally adapt their speech to fit their social world, revealing the power of language beyond grammar or vocabulary.

Kenyan research has established CS as a pervasive phenomenon. Studies by Githiora (2002) on Sheng, and others on CS in media and education, highlight its role in youth identity and urban culture. With regard to CS in Commercial Discourse, Ogechi (2003) and Mbaabu (1996) have touched on language use in commerce. More recent work, like Mutonga (2020), has examined CS in small-scale trading in Nairobi, noting its role in customer attraction and negotiation. Gaps in the Kenyan Literature: While these studies acknowledge CS in markets, there is often a lack of fine-grained, interactional analysis linking specific CS patterns directly to evolving social variables within a single exchange. Many studies treat social context as a broad backdrop rather than a dynamic, moment-by-moment negotiation. Furthermore, there is limited recent research focusing specifically on the discourse of buying and selling as a distinct, goal-oriented activity with its own unique CS rhythms and rules.

Theoretical framework

The study adopted the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton, 1993) which posits that language choice is a rational negotiation of rights and obligations. Speakers use CS to index a "marked" or "unmarked" social position, making strategic choices to redefine a situation, show deference, or assert authority. This is highly relevant to market negotiations where power and rapport are fluid. Conversation Analysis (Auer, 1984): This approach focuses on the sequential organization of talk, analyzing CS as a locally managed, interactional accomplishment. It examines how switches themselves accomplish actions (like repair, quotation, or topic shift) within the micro-dynamics of a conversation. Sociolinguistic Approaches (Gumperz, 1982): Gumperz's concept of

contextualization cues frames CS as a symbolic resource used to signal social information, define participant roles, and negotiate meaning. This aligns with understanding how sellers and buyers use language to frame commercial interactions. Borrowing from Bucholtz & Hall, (2005), this study views CS as a practice of identity construction and social performance. It argues that speakers use linguistic resources to align or dis-align with particular social categories, project personas, and navigate complex social worlds.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an interpretive/constructivist paradigm, which posits that social reality, including language use, is constructed through interaction and meaning-making. Code-switching is viewed as a social action whose meaning is best understood from the participants' perspectives within their specific context.

Accordingly, a qualitative research design is employed, specifically utilizing a discourse-analytic ethnographic approach. This design is chosen because it allows for the collection of rich, naturalistic data on actual language use in its authentic setting. It also facilitates the in-depth analysis of how language forms (code-switches) are linked to social functions and context and enables the researcher to observe and interpret the nuanced social dynamics that quantitative methods might miss.

The study analyzed six (6) naturally occurring buying and selling interactions recorded in selected markets in Bungoma County. Participants included vendors and customers engaged in everyday commercial exchanges involving food items, clothing, and household goods. The primary languages used were Kiswahili, English, and Lubukusu. The interactions varied in terms of familiarity between participants, negotiation intensity, and social dynamics, providing a rich basis for analysis. A purposive sampling technique, supplemented by convenience sampling in the field, was used to select participants and interactions. The study targeted participants who actively engaged in a buying-selling exchange and demonstrably used at least two of the target languages (English, Kiswahili and Lubukusu).

Primary data was audio recordings of spontaneous buying-selling interactions. Following selected recorded interactions, brief, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the vendor. Excerpts from their recording were played back to elicit their reflections on why they switched languages at specific points. This provided crucial emic (insider) perspectives on the social motivations behind CS. Detailed ethnographic notes were also taken on the physical and social context, non-verbal cues (gestures, posture) that complement speech and observational data on perceived social roles, age, gender, and apparent familiarity between interlocutors.

Data analysis was iterative and thematic, following these steps: In Phase 1, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using standard orthography, then code-switches were highlighted and the languages identified (e.g., [SW] for Kiswahili, [ENG] for English, [LUB] for Lubukusu) and finally, translations into English was provided in an adjacent column for analysis.

RESULTS

Patterns of Code-Switching in Market Discourse

This section presents detailed examples from the field data to illustrate how code-switching occurs during real buying and selling negotiations.

Inter-sentential Code-Switching

Inter-sentential code-switching was frequently observed at key negotiation points such as price declaration, counter-offers, and transaction closure.

Seller: *Ni mia tatu* (it is three hundred).

Buyer: *Hiyo ni mob sana* (That is a lot).

Seller: This is the final price, *haiwezi shuka* (it can't drop further).

In this exchange, the seller switches from Kiswahili to English to assert authority and signal finality, then back to Kiswahili to reinforce the message. The switch marks a shift from open negotiation to price closure.

Buyer: *Utanipunguzia kidogo?* (Would kindly reduce the price further for me?)

Seller: *Sawa*, but only because *wewe ni customer wangu wa kawaida*. (It's okay but only because you are my regular customer.)

Here, English is used to justify the concession, giving the decision a rational and professional tone.

Intra-sentential Code-Switching

Intra-sentential switching was common in fast-paced bargaining and product description.

Seller: *Hii sufuria ni very strong, haitaharibika haraka*. (this sufuria is very strong, it won't get worn out any soon.)

The English adjective very strong is embedded within a Kiswahili structure to emphasize quality and durability, enhancing persuasive force.

Buyer: *Nipe discount kidogo, sina cash mingi leo*. (Give me some discount, I don't have a lot of cash with me today.)

This utterance shows fluid mixing that reflects urban bilingual competence and informal negotiation.

Tag-Switching

Tag-switching was used to seek agreement and soften negotiation stances.

Seller: *Bei ni poa, si unajua soko vile iko?* (Today's price is good because of the market prices.)

The Kiswahili tag invites alignment and shared understanding, reducing potential conflict.

Marketplace discourse in Kenya reflects not only linguistic creativity but also regional, generational, and social group diversity. While the examples in this study highlight Kiswahili-English switching in negotiation, similar practices manifest differently across contexts. This study targeted rural market places. It was observed that Indigenous languages dominate, with Kiswahili as a lingua franca. It was also noted that Code-switching occurs between local language ↔ Kiswahili, with English reserved for outsiders.

Social Context Variables Influencing Code-Switching

Participant Roles

Sellers were found to initiate most instances of code-switching. They adjusted their language choice depending on the perceived status, age, or familiarity of the customer. Buyers generally followed the language choice set by sellers, indicating the seller's control over the interactional frame.

Familiarity and Social Distance

Interactions involving regular customers or community members showed higher use of Lubukusu and Kiswahili, often mixed fluidly. In contrast, interactions with strangers or first-time customers relied more on Kiswahili and English. This demonstrates how language choice indexes solidarity or distance.

Age and Gender

Younger participants displayed more frequent and flexible switching between Kiswahili and English. It was observed that youth traders used Sheng to build solidarity and soften bargaining. Example: *Bro, hii ni latest*

design, bei ni friendly Older traders, on the other hand, preferred indigenous languages with Kiswahili insertions. They use English sparingly, often to assert authority. Gender differences were minimal, although female vendors tended to use politer and accommodative forms, often marked by tag-switching.

Communicative Functions of Code-Switching

Building Rapport and Solidarity

Code-switching played a key role in establishing friendliness and trust.

Seller: *Mama, chukua hii, ni fresh kabisa. Hii price ni ya watu wetu.* (Mum, take this, it is fresh. This price is only for our people.)

Switching to an inclusive expression (*watu wetu*) signals solidarity and shared identity.

Negotiation and Persuasion

English was strategically used to project authority during bargaining.

Buyer: *Mia mbili haiwezi?* (Two hundred is too little.)

Seller: Honestly, I'm already giving you the best deal.

The switch to English marks seriousness and attempts to end negotiation.

Conflict Management and Resolution

Code-switching was also used to de-escalate tension.

Buyer: *Mbona unaniuzia bei kubwa?* (Why are you over-charging me?)

Seller: *Pole sana, ngoja nikuelezee vizuri, hii ni wholesale price.* (Am sorry. For your information, this is wholesale price.)

The switch helps calm the interaction and restore cooperation.

Negotiation Stages

This section provides a deeper discussion of the findings by closely examining negotiation stages and showing how code-switching operates dynamically across the buying–selling encounter.

Code-Switching Across Stages of Negotiation

The analysis revealed that code-switching patterns vary systematically across different stages of the transaction: greeting, price inquiry, bargaining, agreement, and closure.

Greeting Stage: Greetings were predominantly conducted in Kiswahili or local languages to establish rapport.

Seller: *Mulembe, mayi, wabolakho?* (How are you mummy?)

Buyer: *Ee, nechile chinyenyi chase.* (Yes, am back to pick my vegetables).

The use of Lubukusu greetings (Mulembe, wabolakho) immediately establishes ethnic solidarity and a friendly interactional frame.

Price Inquiry Stage: During price inquiry, speakers often switched to Kiswahili or English for clarity.

Buyer: *Hii ni bei gani?* (What is the price for this?)

Seller: *Ni one fifty kwa kilo.* (It is fifty shillings per kg.)

The numerical component is expressed in English, indexing precision and commercial seriousness.

Bargaining Stage: This stage showed the highest frequency of code-switching.

Buyer: *Bei yino iri angaki lukali.* (This price is a bit high).

Seller: No, this is market price. *Khukhwisia (I can't reduce further)* cheaper ta.

The seller combines English with Lubukusu to reinforce authority while maintaining local accessibility.

Agreement and Closure Stage: Once agreement was reached, speakers reverted to Kiswahili or local languages.

Seller: *Sawa basi, chukua mia mbili.* Asante sana. (It is okay. Take two hundred shillings. Thanks).

Buyer: *Asante pia.* (Thank you too).

This return to Kiswahili marks transaction completion and restores social harmony.

Power, Authority, and Language Choice

Power relations were clearly indexed through language choice. Sellers, as gatekeepers of goods, often used English as a marked choice to assert authority, particularly when resisting further bargaining.

Buyer: *Punguza kidogo nipate discount.* (Reduce further so that I get some discount).

Seller: I can't go below that price, trust me.

English here functions as a boundary-setting resource, limiting negotiation.

However, sellers also strategically switched to local languages to soften authority.

Seller: *Wewe ni omuntu wefwe, sitakukasia sana.* (You are my tribesperson; I won't be too hard on you).

The switch to Lubukusu (omuntu wefu) reconfigures power into solidarity, aligning with Myers-Scotton's markedness choices.

Code-Switching and Identity Construction

Speakers used code-switching to perform multiple identities: professional trader, community member, or friendly negotiator.

Seller: *Hii business imenisaidia sana hapa soko.* (This business has benefited me a lot.)

The English noun business signals modern, entrepreneurial identity, while Kiswahili grounds the speaker locally.

Managing Conflict and Face-Saving

When disagreements arose, speakers frequently switched to Kiswahili or local languages to save face and restore cooperation.

Buyer: *Unataka kunikula pesa yangu.* (You want to cone me my money!)

Seller: *Pole wase, sio hivyo. lekha ekhubolele..* (Am sorry but It is not so. Let me explain...)

The switch functions as a politeness and conflict-management strategy.

Code-Switching in an Electronic Shop Context

Unlike food or clothing stalls, electronic shops displayed more frequent and sustained use of English, especially when discussing specifications, quality, and warranties. English indexed technical expertise and professionalism, while Kiswahili was used to negotiate price and maintain rapport.

Buyer: *Hii simu ni bei gani?* (How much is this?)

Seller: *Ni elfu kumi na tano, lakini luli nende very strong battery ne warranty ya kimiesi sita.* (It is Ksh. 15,000 but has a very strong battery and a 6 months warranty.)

Buyer: *Sewikhwisiakho pukusi chana ta?* (You can't lower the price a bit?)

Seller: Honestly, *hiyo price ni fixed, lakini ndakhuwelesia charger extra bure.* (Honestly, this is fixed price but I will give you a charger for free.)

In this interaction, the seller uses Lubukusu to negotiate and maintain solidarity (khukhwisia, ndakhuwelesia), while English indexes technical expertise (strong battery, warranty). This pattern reflects the blending of authority and familiarity typical in electronic goods transactions in regional markets.

The findings strongly support Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model. Kiswahili functioned as the unmarked code of transaction, while English and Lubukusu were employed as marked choices to negotiate authority, solidarity, or identity. Gumperz's notion of contextualization cues is evident in how switches signaled shifts in footing, tone, and activity type throughout the interaction.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that code-switching in markets is not static but evolves dynamically within a single interaction because it is systematic and socially motivated and that language choice indexes power and solidarity and determines switching patterns; English was used to assert authority while Kiswahili and Lubukusu as local languages to foster community ties. Market discourse reflects broader sociolinguistic realities. The blending of languages in everyday transactions mirrors Kenya's multilingual ecology and the coexistence of global and local identities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) Market discourse can be integrated into language teaching to illustrate authentic bilingual practices.
- ii) Recognize and valorize indigenous languages like Lubukusu in public domains, including commerce, to preserve cultural identity.
- iii) The government should support initiatives that promote multilingual literacy, ensuring equitable participation in economic activities.

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