



LANGUAGE CHOICES AS MULTILINGUAL IDENTITY PERFORMANCE AMONG NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the utilization of different linguistic codes for the performance of multilingual identities among undergraduates at a University in South-south, Nigeria. Data were generated by means of participant observations and semi-structured interviews with the aid of audiotape recorders and field notes during a ten-month fieldwork involving 100 students. Findings show situations where participants' deploy their knowledge on use of multiple (registers and/or varieties of) language(s) to accomplish certain academic tasks. The use (and intermixing) of languages or registers by students enact (cross-)disciplinary, national linguistic, intragroup, ethnolinguistic and plurilingual identities. The language practices reconstruct Nigerian University students' multilingual identity performance exemplified in the deployment of appropriate code(s) to attend to communication exigencies in specific contexts of recurring discourses on different tasks in an academic environment. It is recommended that multilingual activities be encouraged in academic institutions to enable plurilingual students achieve desired goals for individual, collective and national development.

Keywords: Edulingualism, Language choice, Multilingual identities, Multilingual performance, Nigerian University students.



1. Introduction

The sociolinguistic situation in Nigeria produces individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds which manifest diverse languages' competencies and orientations deployed in the performance of multilingual identities essential for the achievement of specific academic tasks among undergraduates across universities in Nigeria. The language situation in Nigeria is complex, heterogeneous and shows multilingual linguistic practices that utilize over 500 co-existing languages used in different social contexts and for various purposes (Adegbija, 2004; Uwen & Okafor, 2025). Multilingualism is a linguistic practice that facilitates cross-linguistic interactions among discourse participants and often conceptualized as a body of resources that place languages as emergent from contexts of such interactions (Bourdieu, 1991; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). Such languages are used to attend to the communication needs in different social contexts particularly in multilingual discourse sites and they facilitate the reconstruction of the identities of speakers in such discourses involving multilingual participants.

Unarguably, the concept of identity is construed along the line of how people understand themselves and others know them based on structured, patterned and repeated language practices and behaviors across time and space, and as regulated by individuals' psychological and social relational processes. Language here becomes a sociopsychological medium that expresses identity, ideology, culture and other preferences (Nyamekye et al. 2026). Identities are developed, negotiated, transformed, transferred, performed and reconstructed, and sometimes imposed based on specific social contexts and participants (Miller, 2000; Rassokha, 2001). And because identities are performed within discursive events, they are often rehearsed in specific institutional sites and deployed as aspects of discourse strategies that show some commonality of practices in communicative events involving interethnolinguistic participants (Hall, 1996; Mercuri, 2012). The commonality in terms of the use of multiple languages among different social groups establishes the formulation and delineation of identities between participants. This implies that the patterning of identity formulation using linguistic codes vary from one social group to another. Going by this assertion, the order in which languages are used is therefore informed by the multilingual backgrounds of speakers who also determine social inclusion and exclusion during interactions. On this, Rantanen (2024) maintains that in such settings, the multilingual personae become agents of some kind of empowerment in the discursive practices that suggest the use of their knowledge of languages to bridge power structures, foster social inclusion, perform active participatory roles in obligatory discourses and instantiate their multilingual identities.

Studies have established that multilingual identity performance cuts across communication contexts in multilingual societies. For instance, Obiri-Yeboah (2019) conducts study on the linguistic repertoires of members of Victory Baptist Church in the Akan-speaking area of Ghana. The study shows that adherents deploy code-switching, lexical borrowing and diglossic expressions to represent their multilingual identities. In the music domain, Banda (2019) argues that language is viewed as a social practice that depicts how popular music intersects with performative multilingual and multicultural identities. The study showcases how music in Zambia dialogues with the traditional and the modern, the rural and the urban, the translocal and transnational, and the ethnolinguistic and sociocultural worldviews that define the multiple linguistic affiliations of the musicians and audiences. Also in the media, Kelly-Holmes and



Pietikainen (2013, p. 3926) asserts that media representation in multilingual audience demands “decision-making processes about language(s): the decision to use one language rather than another; the decision to opt for a formal register or variety of a language, or to use a speaker who has a particular accent in media presentations.” This selectivity is often informed by the multilingual concerns, identities and experiences of the listening and viewing audiences. In political discourse, Patrick et al. (2022) states that politicians in Nigeria often code-switch to various languages of the ethnic nationalities to create sense of belonging and situate the linguistic identities of the audience they address in order to arouse political sentiments that stimulate the achievement of political goals. In university education context (which is the focus of the current study), Reilly et al. (2024) contends that staff exhibit different levels of multilingualism to ensure that students understand the communicated information within language practices and expectations in Malawian universities. During social interactions among university students, Lim (2024, p. 17) claims that they “construct their identity through complex, dynamic and constant processes, and this identity is subject to continual change as per social interactions and circumstances.” This position suggests that multilingualism is a beneficial language practice because university students use various languages and/or registers to perform various functions depending on their communication needs. It has been established that multilingualism in the university context enhances cross cultural communication strategies and skills, broad cultural awareness, performance of academic tasks and promotion of indigenous languages (Okal, 2014). These factors encourage the increasing population of plurilingual students in the universities particularly in multilingual nations.

Multilingual identity performance is operationally used in this study to describe the knowledge and use of different (registers and/or varieties of) languages by plurilingual university students to perform (academic) tasks that demand the use of such code(s) in certain contexts. The current study aims to investigate how language choices by Nigerian students (particularly among undergraduates at the University under study) reflect different dimensions of multilingual identity performance. Specifically, the study would examine the complex circumstances and social contexts that informed the students’ language(s) and/or registers choices and how such social interactions reproduce the dynamics of language use suggestive of multilingual identity performance by the participants. To achieve this, the study relies on insights from Postcolonial pragmatics and Edulingualism (Achimbe, 2011, Achimbe & Jenny, 2011, 2017; Gimenez, 2023) to account for such language orientations in postcolonial multilingual societies and how this is rehearsed among undergraduates at the University under study to perform their multilingual identities. This, it is believed, would help to show how plurilingual students in English language-dominant Nigerian university deploy their linguistic competencies in utilizing appropriate language choices in different social contexts to enact multilingual identity performance towards the realization of their individual and collective goals.

1.1 Studies on translanguaging and identity construction among university students

Gracia and Wei (2014) contend that translanguaging was previously used in the context of bilingual education to refer to the pedagogical practice that allows the alternate use of languages in academic contexts. The concept has been extended to accommodate the discursive practices among bi/multilinguals beyond school contexts, and its legitimization means social justice and



empowerment of students and learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Gracia, 2009; Gracia & Wei, 2014). Wei and Gracia (2022) add that translanguaging is a decolonizing language attitude that reveals how bi/multilinguals communicate with different linguistic knowledge and cultural practices. On the gains, Sarkar and Ahmad (2025) argue that the impact of translanguaging pedagogies as a strategic integration of learners' diverse linguistic repertoires can empower multilingual learners to cope and understand the communicative complexities in the universities. Also, Cenoz and Gorter (2025) corroborate that the potential of translanguaging introduces flexible language practices that optimize the benefits of multilingualism, addresses both linguistic and content-related contexts and enhance linguistic and academic achievements by plurilingual students.

Similarly, language and identity studies focus mainly on how individuals, social groups and speech communities construct, negotiate, maintain and project their social identities through linguistic practices in different social contexts (Parish & Bailey, 2024). Again, Fisher et al. (2022) ascertains that schools are fertile sites for the multilingual development of young people because students' linguistic experiences and behaviors stem from homes, nurtured in the society and manifest in schools where students practicalize their collective perception of multilingualism. On this, Parkinson and Crouch (2013) argue that tertiary education exemplifies linguistic and communication peculiarities with language practices meant to accommodate several values, learnings and literacies from where the multilingual identities of students evolved. Mendoza (2023) further adds that the university system is a heterogeneously diverse setting that showcases the multilingual identities of students through their varied use of languages to perform different academic tasks in an academic environment. In such contexts, multilingual identity foregrounds the awareness and understanding individuals and groups have towards themselves in terms of speaking and use of languages including the motivations, ideologies and beliefs that resulted in such language practices (Henry, 2017; Fisher et al., 2020). This is why it is argued that education plays a fundamental role in enacting and intersecting the increasing linguistic diversity and multilingual identities of young people (Forbes, 2022). The university context therefore accommodates series of communicative activities initiated and maintained by students to attend to the heaps of assignments that come their way on daily basis.

Specifically, scholars have investigated the use of multiple languages among university students towards the construction of their multilingual identities particularly in English language-dominant institutions across the globe. For instance, Fang et al. (2023) demonstrate that Chinese students who attend universities in countries where English is used as a lingua franca are often confronted with new linguistic orientations. The authors conclude that the particular Chinese's continuous communication with other students from different lingua-cultures often result in their speaking multiple languages thereby performing multilingual identities in their repertoires. Also, Blomquist (2009) states that in Sweden, the university education system is designed for the teaching and learning of the Swedish normative culture which encourages a code-switching language behavior by students. In such situations, the language attitude becomes the agency for the instantiation of their multicultural and multilingual identities. Again, in England, Gimenez (2023) claims that the linguistic repertoires of students in the English language-dominant universities are the agency for performing academic tasks and negotiation of identities. Among



university students in Canada, Marshall and Marr (2018) also argue that such multilingual codes are socially and discursively constructed and serve as agencies for the negotiation between languages and the identities they represent. It is a similar language situation in Australian universities where Smyth et al. (2013) observe that undergraduates are often involved in certain communicative activities to enact their collective social identifications based on their academic disciplines. It is also established by the authors that ethnic languages form basic aspects of the repertoires of university students. Furthering on this, Ting and Abidin (2023) argue that the different languages used in communication among students in Malaysian universities enact ethnolinguistic identities just as Rantanen (2024) affirms that because of the multilingual context of educational institutions, Finish learners have become multilingual experts with diverse linguistic identities.

In Africa, scholars have also demonstrated how undergraduate students use several linguistic behaviors to contextualize the activities in the universities they attend. For instance, in Tanzania, Mohr (2018) states that the country's language policy is producing undergraduate students who speak English and negotiate identity using the language. It is a similar situation in Malawi where Reilly (2019) instantiates that university students' attitude towards English language as a medium of instruction indicates a shift towards the propagation of Anglicized identity. Nyamekye and Uwen (2024) have noted that in most British-colonized nations (and particularly in Ghana), speaking English is ideologically motivated as it is conceived as a marker of literacy, quality education, civilization and enlightenment. The dominance of English and its shaping of language ideologies in (some) multilingual African countries appear prominent in the social interactions among students in the universities (Mohr, 2018; Reilly, 2019; Nyamekye & Uwen, 2024). Also, the use of various languages among students in South African universities is viewed as the enactment of participants' conscious negotiation and construction of racial, cultural, ethnolinguistic, multilingual and (cross)disciplinary identities (Parkinson & Crouch, 2013).. In Nigeria, Dozie and Madu's (2012) study suggests that university students devise and deploy slangs to express situated meaning orientations, linguistic creativity and their linguistic identity. Such linguistic creativity is also shown in the use of short messaging forms that situate their linguistic identities and how university students communicate among themselves (Njamanze, 2012). This linguistic innovations distinguish the students as a distinct social group. Also, Akintunde and Ohiare-Udebu (2021) emphasize the importance of using indigenous languages to construct identities among students. The use of local languages connect speakers with their ethnic backgrounds where English language does not. In another study, Obuasi (2018, as cited in Uwen, Ehimikhuai & Ellah, 2025) argues that the linguistic fluidity and identity construction in university students' discourses have created participants' consciousness on language choices depending on the goals it is meant to serve. It is the motivation for the social interaction that stimulates such consciousness. Again, Melefa, Chukwumezie and Adighibe's (2017) study on language use among University of Nigeria's undergraduate students conclude that participants construct and ascribe identities through devised discursive strategies that generate situated meanings. Uwen, Melefa and O'Neill (2024) explore language use from the social context of two Nigerian universities to conclude that undergraduates devise linguistic creations that define their worldview, foster bonding, social cohesion and sense of belonging while ascribing identities to selves. Again,



Uwen's (2023c) investigation on male representations in the heterosexual discourse among female undergraduates in Nigeria shows that participants explore from the multilingual situation in Nigeria to ascribe identities on their male sexual partners. Insights from the above scholars have provided a foundational basis for deepening the discourse on multilingual identity performance among plurilingual undergraduates which is the thrust of this study. However, none of the contributions discusses how such languages and/or creations are used by students to instantiate their plurilingual identities. Drawing from this, the current study provides expanding understanding on how languages are used to frame discourses on multilingual identity performance within the context of the communication goals of the university undergraduate students.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical orientations considered relevant to this study are Postcolonial pragmatics and Edulingualism. Postcolonial pragmatics is conceptualized to explicate the distinctively complex, hybridic communication environments and speakers (Anchimbe & Janney, 2011). Such sociolinguistic environments are found within multilingual nations (particularly in African and Asian counties) that were formerly colonized by mostly monolingual and monocultural Western and European countries. This theorization emanates from the notion that Western pragmatic structures and strategies practiced in such monolingual and monocultural communicative contexts are incapable for the interpretation of the heterogeneously, linguistically and culturally complex postcolonial societies (Achimbe, 2011, Achimbe & Jenny, 2011, 2017). Postcolonial pragmatics is therefore a suitable analytical framework for examining the complex linguistic peculiarities in postcolonial societies (Otung, 2019). The tenets contextualize and examine multilingual practices performed by plurilingual individuals as they attend to their communication needs, strengthen interpersonal relationships, enact language ideologies and perform multilingual and multicultural identities broadened by the infusion of the linguistic and cultural orientations of colonization. The language experience establishes the interface between Western monolingual and monocultural pragmatic practices and postcolonial multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic pragmatic strategies in postcolonial pragmatics. Specifically, Achimbe and Janney (2011) argue that postcolonial pragmatics aims to examine the underlying pragmatic strategies and functions that inform the preferences and choices of languages that may result in code-switching and code-mixing in discourses involving multilingual participants. The authors posit that such discursive situations show ethnic alignments and ingroup allegiances which help to delineate social roles in achieving communication goals and negotiate, construct and perform identities. Such linguistic practices demonstrate and situate the circumstances for discourse participations, and the inclusion and exclusion of interactants as may be regulated by topics, situational contexts and plurilingual nature of participants.

Edulingualism on the other hand is Gimenez's (2023) recent conceptual and methodological framework used in examining plurilingual students' communicative activities in multilingual universities. It is "a new conceptual and analytical lens that encapsulates how the dynamic relationship between linguistic repertoires, academic tasks and agency take place in the English-dominant university setting" (Gimenez, 2023, p. 656). Preece and Marshall (2020) as cited in Gimenez (2023, p. 658) conceive plurilingualism as an analytic term that describes "the ability



to use and switch between multiple languages, in a flexible and hybrid manner [that] recognizes a speaker's knowledge of not only multiple languages but also their cultures." This is achieved through the appropriate manipulation of participants' linguistic repertoires exemplified in the knowledge and use of multiple languages. Repertoires are socially constructed hybridized forms that individuals use in negotiating between languages during social interactions enabled by their competencies in different communication codes. Repertoires are also "understood as all the languages known to an individual, through social interactions and co-actions in particular setting" (Gimenez, 2023, p. 657). The author further argues that language expertise develops from a gradual but life-long process by which speakers continuously use linguistic repertoires in several situated communication contexts. This expertise includes the several bits of knowledge speakers have on languages with the communicative abilities that enable them to interact in different social contexts in order to learn, socialize, perform multilingual identities and achieve specific goals in educational settings (Rampton, 1990; Canagarajah, 2013; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015; Codo, 2018). It is these goals that stimulate the use of different languages and registers by plurilinguals in certain social contexts within the university environment.

According to Gimenez (2023, p. 658), Edulingualism as an emerging framework is a response to "the need to identify a specific, context-sensitive way to conceptualize and empirically analyze the dynamic relationship between the practices of adult plurilingual students and their academic and social activities in English language-dominant university." This is because the widening learning spaces in the university appear to generate different discourses while using different (varieties of) languages for different purposes and achievement of different goals. The author emphasizes that as a theoretical concept, Edulingualism provides the basis for use and understanding of the dynamic nature of language practices across academic disciplines and social contexts in the university. This orientation enables plurilingual students to interact with the related interconnections, inclusions and exclusions that result from such interactions both in and out of the classroom within the communication concerns in the university context. As a conceptual framework, Edulingualism offers to examine linguistic experiences of plurilinguals are harnessed to achieve certain discourse goals in school environment. The two theoretical orientations are relevant to this study because they account for the linguistic patterns of postcolonial multilingual societies like Nigeria and how they reflect in micro social groups that operate within the macro context of the larger Nigerian society. Insights gained are further utilised to demonstrate how multilingual language practices by plurilingual students in the selected University are harnessed through the appropriate deployment of multilingual resources to regulate, control and participate in learning, socializing and networking in order to achieve individual and collective goals.

3. Methodology

The study adopts ethnographic approach during a ten-month period of field work involving 100 students who willingly provided informed consent before they were allowed to participate and interviewed. Though 100 appears somewhat small considering the population of the university, however, they were used as a representative sample of students in the University under study. The small population is to contain a manageable sample size and to avoid unnecessary elicitation of repeated information. Using a guided purposive sample selection method, the participants were



consulted at various points (lecture halls, recreation areas, sport facilities, religious grounds, students' union events, studios and eateries) within the university environment. The criteria for the purposive selection are based on the Department and Faculty they belong to (for even representation across Faculties), participant's year of study (year two to final year) which is considered a reasonable period for proper adaptation to language practices in the university's environment, and knowledge and understanding of the patterning and linguistic peculiarities of the students in different social contexts. Other criteria include being bi/multilingual in English and one or more other languages spoken in the school to show the dynamics of language use and familiarity with the topic which helps in the production of valid data. The selected participants have equal number of males and females for gender balancing and their age ranged from 18 to 26 years to agree with local laws which allowed for personal decision making. The demographic information obtained showed that in terms of gender, there were 50 (50%) males and 50 (50%) females, for the age range, we had 35 (35%) aged between 18-20, 40 (40%) between 21-23 and 25 (25%) between 24-26 years old. All the participants were bi/multilinguals who could speak English (for academic and specific purposes), Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, students' slang and one or more of Nigerian indigenous languages (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, Tiv, Eghagham, Yakurr, Mbube, Erei, among others). They were drawn across the 34 faculties of the institution to ascertain the multilingual identities of students across academic disciplines. The participants' anonymity were achieved through the use of pseudo names throughout their participation in order not to reveal their real names.

The study is a descriptive survey that generated data by means of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the aid of smart phones for audio recording and field notes for documentation. Questions framed for the semi-structured interviews were meant to provide answers on: the program of study and the faculty, year of study, ethnolinguistic background of the participant, number of languages the participant(s)' speak, knowledge of English for academic and specific purposes, context of usage, functions the languages (or registers) perform and how they are used in the performance of multilingual identities. Participant observation enabled the researchers to access the participants and initiate interactions that provided the contexts for the elicitation of the needed data. This method was easy because the authors are educators in the institution and have deepened knowledge on the dynamics of language use among plurilingual students in different social contexts of interactions within the selected university. The duration of the study was the 2024/2025 academic session spanning from October, 2024 to July, 2025 excluding the first semester holidays. The periods fully utilized were eight weeks before examinations for the first and second semesters examination (that is, January to February, 2025 and May to June, 2025). The choice of the time is because it is the period the school usually record the highest population towards the completion of lectures and revision for examination. Within the duration of the study, the authors explored situations where the participants were fairly relaxed and in good bearings to engage them in the interviews and recordings of their conversations for the purpose of gathering relevant data. The excerpts cited in the analysis were extracted from the corpus of similar data. The excerpts were used because they were particularly relevant to the thrust of the study, and to avoid overlapping of themes and meanings. The data were then reviewed and



harmonized to ascertain their validity for the study before they were coded and analyzed using descriptive approach based on the themes derived from the findings.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis is subdivided into five subheadings to account for the different dimensions of language use by plurilingual students at the selected University. The interactions are grouped into excerpts 1 to 12 according to the various domains of discourse. Roman figures (1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) are used to indicate exchanges in the various excerpts while alphabets (A, B, C, D and so on) represent individual speakers. The exchanges are combined with responses from interviewees for discussion in the qualitative and descriptive analysis as presented below.

4.1 Slanguaging as social (group) identity construction

The university is a fertile site for linguistic creativity among undergraduates who use 'language' to attend to certain communication needs. These peculiar needs often stimulate the creation of slang expressions that serve to reinforce the social bond among students. Slanguaging is used operationally in this study to describe undergraduates' creative use of language devised through morphological processes or resemanticized expressions to generate meaning orientations that are mutually intelligible within the students' social group. Slanguaging among students are captured in the excerpts 1, 2 and 3 below.

Excerpt 1

1A: On the fundamental gbagba!

Chorus: Gbagba!

1A: On the fundamental gbosa!

Chorus: Gbosa!

1A: I want to yarn!

Chorus: Yarn!

1A: I want to vibrate!

Chorus: Vibrate!

The above excerpts is the interchange between Students' Union leader and the students he represents. The extract is the preliminary interchange that precedes the crux of the address of the students' representative. *Gbagba*, *gbosa*, *yarn* and *vibrate* are slang expressions that provide introductory protocol to speeches of leaders in students' associations. *Gbagba* and *gbosa* are praise devices that evoke solidarity and recognition of the audience as supportive force in the struggle. *Yarn* and *vibrate* are permissive markers for the speech to be delivered which simultaneously calls for the attention of the audience. A 24 year old male student who is the president of students belonging to one of the faculties reported that such slang expressions are common in speeches delivered by any student that is conscious and familiar with Students' Union activities on campus. He narrated that the expressions are solidarity devices that encourage students and spur them into action where the need arises. He noted the instances where such expressions are used to include students' campaigns for elections and other major students' language situations that call for protest. The participant's position is corroborated by Olawe's (2022) claim that the pragmatics of phatic utterances by students union leaders in Nigerian universities are meant to strengthen



solidarity, re-awaken consciousness to react to a situation and used to create social bonding towards the achievement of certain goals. Uwen et al. (2024) add that workplace discourses and language use in certain situations often appropriate and legitimise speakers' use of power wielding language in appropriate situations to call for change.

Excerpt 2

1B: This our squad is so bad.

1C: Omo, the formation is tight and unshakable.

1D: My missile is always legit, it hits on target.

1E: I pray the eagle-eyed people will be on deactivation mode.

1F: Those destiny destroyers? God forbid bad thing!

1G: Be on maximum composure.

1B: Zero panic is the code, we move!

Excerpt 2 above is the interaction among six course mates ahead of their upcoming examination. The participants introduced expressions that are situated and interpretable in the context of examination in progress. The weaponization and militarization of some of the expressions (*squad*, *formation*, *tight*, *unshakable*, *missile*, *hits* and *target*) construe students' description of foreign materials as ammunition utilized in their solidarity and preparedness to cheat uncaught. *Legit*, a clipped term for 'legitimate' denotes that the foreign material will match with examination question(s). *The eagle-eyed people* is a metaphoric representation of strict invigilators who speaker 1E prays that they be *in deactivation mode* (inactive and/or compromising) throughout the duration of the examination. Speaker 1F refers to the category of invigilators as *destiny destroyers* because their uncompromising postures often lead to failures that could keep the affected students beyond the required duration of their studies. The responses from speakers 1G and 1B provide situational advisory: *maximum exposure* (to show sufficient respect) and *zero panic* (never to get scared so as not to become suspicious for searching). *We move!* (in speaker 1B's concluding remark), in the context of its usage, is a conclusion and determination device to indicate a command for the actualization of their plan to cheat during the examination. A 23-year old female student who claimed not to have cheated in any examinations, reported that the language of examination malpractice has an increasing vocabulary whose meanings are mutually intelligible particularly among students who engage in malpractice. She stressed that the major aim of every student is to make good result and students engage in different acts to achieve this. On this, Osiogun (2017) substantiates that the increasing examination malpractice by university students in Nigeria arises from students' desperation for academic success through dishonest means usually enabled by the perpetrators' cooperation among themselves and their resolve to depend on and use foreign materials during examinations.

Excerpt 3

1H: Omo, we got to study hard to make good grades.

1I: Gal, use what you have to get what you want.

1J: Meaning?

1K: Babe, you see this campus? Two major things are involved: we got to feed, we got to pass exams!



1I: Check out our endowment. Full option, front and back is fully padded.

1H: Abi? Are you encouraging 'S for M'?

1K: You have said so!

1J: I won't try that!

Excerpt 3 is interaction between four female undergraduates who argue on divided opinions on the way to attain academic success. Speakers (1H and 1J) align with the choice of hard work and oppose the option of offering themselves for sex in order to pass their examinations while Speakers 1I and 1K are willing to offer sex for good grades. The two-sided stance shows that two categories of female students have divergent opinions on how to attain academic success. However, Uwen, Melefa and O'Neill (2024) have emphasized that the major aim for students in the university is to come out with good results and some female undergraduates are willing to offer sex to achieve this. This is exemplified in Speaker 2I's luring statement *gal* (slang for 'girl'), *use what you have to get what you want* which describes the girls' anatomy as an *endowment with full option, front and back is fully padded*. 'The expressions are drawn from students' community of practice to describe sexually attractive girls with large buttocks and big breasts just as *S for M*' as used by speaker 1H is abbreviated slang for 'sex for marks'. A 20-year old female student also argued that the university environment is fertile for the practice of heterosexual orientations (including offering sex for grades by a few female students), noting that such behaviors are sometimes not permissible when students are at home with their parents. She cautioned that such acts are seriously frowned at by the school management even though female undergraduates devise linguistic creations to ascribe such sexual identities. Uwen (2023c) argues that students draw from language practices within the university context to construct, negotiate, describe and represent sexual narratives that show emerging sexual orientations and identities. Slanging therefore enhances students' engagements in social interactions that negotiate and regulate contexts of communications that portray the dynamics in instantiating linguistic and social identities among students in the university, a language practice that is rooted within the core tenets of Postcolonial pragmatics and Edilingualism.

4.2 Language for indexation of (cross-)disciplinary identity

One of the communicative domains where the undergraduates instantiate their identities across academic disciplines is their knowledge and use of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). EAP, according to Gillett (1989, p. 92) refers to "the language and associated practices that people need in order to undertake study or work in English medium higher education". It is institutional and cross-disciplinary language practices involved in studying in tertiary institutions. In context of this study, EAP is used to refer to registers in English that describe academic texts used to perform tasks across all programs of study while ESP means registers used in specific academic disciplines. The implication is that all undergraduates presumably understand EAP while the knowledge of ESP is somehow restricted to students in different disciplines. On this, Parish and Bailey (2024) argue that the choice of academic disciplines by students ultimately regulates and influences their discourse domains and pattern of language use. In the university context, exposure to language use in classroom interactions



between educators and students sometimes direct how language is used outside classrooms to situate some discourses. The extracts that convey the use of EAP and ESP are represented below.

Excerpt 4

2A: Is the next lecture cancelled?

2B: You know it's a fixed class. The class rep is searching for an empty lecture hall for us to use.

2C: Okay then. I better remain here to do my assignment. The semester is far spent and the examination table is out already.

2D: Really? I haven't even concluded the registration of courses and the portal is closed.

2B: We have to start night class, GSS exam is scheduled for next week. I saw XXX result print out. She has many failed grade, she is on change programme.

2A: Oh, poor girl! Well, that seems a bit better than to be on withdrawal.

The four participants involved in the exchanges in excerpt 4 above draw from registers of EAP in the university to narrate a given situation. While the students were waiting for the *class rep(resentative)* to search for an *empty lecture hall*, Speaker 2C chooses to do his *assignment* while informing his *course mates* that *examination time table* has been published. Speaker 2D regrets not concluding the *registration of courses* before the *portal is closed* while speaker 2B informs them of their upcoming *GSS exam* and advises they commence *night class* (to read). Speaker 2B draws their attention one of their course mate whose *result print out* shows *change programme* because the student did not study hard. These choices in the exchanges are registers common and used by undergraduates across academic disciplines. On this note, Mendoza (2023) argues that students use their linguistic repertoires to reflect their deepened understanding across topics and disciplines in the university's social context to negotiate identities and engage in exclusive and inclusive discourses involving plurilingual participants. A 20-year old male student claimed that students across academic programs of study are knowledgeable in the use of EAP as it defines their social identity as undergraduates engaged in academic tasks in specific areas.

Excerpt 5

2E: In this campus, it's just law students and others.

2F: Some students in other programmes think that studying law is that easy.

2G: Just ignore them. Could they pass 'CIL231: Law of contract' for instance? One needs to know the considerations, binding terms and obligations on parties using case studies.

2H: Yes. And the oblivious clauses, warranty and exceptions to enable the effectuation of any contract or determine its breach...

Excerpt 5 indexes the expression of identity in specific academic discipline as seen in the interaction among undergraduates studying law. Speakers 2E and 2F express professional pride in studying law while speakers 2G and 2H employ registers of law particularly drawn from one of their courses (*CIL231: Law of contract*) to situate the discourse which creates social exclusion of students from other disciplines. A 19-year old male student narrated that students are just proud of their programs of study. He continued by stating that it is confidence and perceptions that situate and differentiate the identity of students in one academic discipline from the other. Another 24-year female student emphasized that law students are often easily identified because they are always on black suits and



they habitually use legal terms to exclude others from their conversations. As observed in the text in excerpt 5, Uwen (2023b) has earlier acknowledged that legal language has specialized linguistic cues with technical vocabulary and uses common words that convey uncommon meanings interpretable in legal context. On linguistic identities based on academic disciplines, Smyth et al. (2023) maintain that university undergraduate students share important but different social identifications across academic disciplines that shape their (varieties and/or registers of) language practices that represent specific educational and professional values and communication pattern, and the perception of selves and their view about others. The implication is that there is potential relationship between students' discipline identities and language use as socio-psychological variable that impacts on academic achievement. The registers switch by the students is a linguistic behavior that is indicative of certain identities identified across disciplines. Here, the principles of Edulingualism offer insights into how cross-disciplinary identities are instantiated through the use of discipline-specific and context-sensitive registers and meanings are negotiated and interpreted across disciplines to achieve academic goals.

4.3 Language for the expression of national linguistic identity

Other languages spoken by undergraduate students that demonstrate the construction of national linguistic identity are Nigerian English (used synonymously with Nigerianisms in this study) and Nigerian Pidgin (NP). Aspects of Nigerianisms consists of three features of nativisation: linguistic, pragmatic and creative dimensions that show some intrusion or interference from indigenous concepts (Bamgbose, 1995; Jowith, 2000). It adapts to the Nigerian sociocultural context to account for its peculiarities in social interactions. On the structure of NP, Egbokhare (2003) has demonstrated that the vocabulary of NP is predominantly in Anglicized spellings with large percentage sourced from English language combined with elements of indigenous languages. NP has developed from its initial status of a marginalized language to an urbanized code used across social class. The excerpts below are used to demonstrate that the languages represent national identity.

Excerpt 6

3A: My sisters, I learnt Dr YY is asking ZZ's hand in marriage.

3B: Yes, he has been chasing the girl since year 1. I hope he can eat well.

3C: That lecturer is not broke. He is a big man (he is an affluent man). Small no be sick.

3D: They have concluded knocking on the door, the introduction is this weekend.

3E: I know the village. There will be enough bush meat in the ceremony.

3A: He'll soon put her in a family way.

3C: I pray she will cope with studies too!

Excerpt 6 is an interaction among five students. The exchanges focus on a non-curricula topic, particularly on a course mate who is about to get married traditionally. The interaction is dominated with elements of Nigerian English that convey local meanings. For instance, *sisters* (semantically extended to mean females from same region), *asking her hand in marriage* (proposing to marry her), *chasing the girl* (courting), *can eat well* (rich enough), *is not broke* (not poor), *big man* (affluent man), *small no be sick* (should not be rated by the size/height), *knocking on the door* (first stage of knowing the family of the spouse), *introduction* (pre-wedding ceremony), *bush meat*



(cooked or smoked meat of wild animals) and *put her in a family way* (impregnate her) are all features of English usage that interpret Nigerian sociocultural concepts. A 23-year old female students reported that such English lexical items with semantically shifted or extended meanings are mutually intelligible by students across ethnolinguistic backgrounds as aspects of their national identity. On this, Babarinde and Ahamefula (2020) argue that the emergence of Nigerian English is not evidence of lack of proficiency in Standard (British or American) English by some Nigerians, but is rather the manifest of a linguistic code that draws from the contact between English and indigenous languages. This interface produces acculturized, domesticated and nativized variety that accounts for discourses that represent the sociocultural milieu of Nigeria just as it indexes national linguistic identity.

Excerpt 7

3F: Guy, shebi we been agree say we dey go fellowship dis evening.

3G: Bros, nothin dey to wak. I no chop be dat.

3H: Sho! Shebi wen food been dey berekete you been dey dash am like craze person.

3I: So na food you dey take dey serve God?

3F: Agreement na agreement! We go go de go complain our mata give baba God.

3K: Make we no carry God mata play o. Na God dey carry us dey waka for dis campus.

3H: I dey tell you! If no be oga God, we for don see shege.

Excerpt 7 is a conversation in NP among five male students in a hostel room. Speaker 3F reminds his roommates of a fellowship (Christian religious program) they ought to attend, 3G complains of being very hungry while 3H accuses him of being wasteful when they had enough food. While speaker 3I questions 3G on the rationale for worshipping God only with a filled stomach, 3F insists they will attend the program to complain to God about their conditions. Speakers 3K and 3H conclude with emphasis on the relevance of God, maintaining that without the grace of God, they could not achieve any academic success. The presence of elements from English (*fellowship*, *food*, *agreement* and so on) and indigenous languages (Yoruba words *baba* and *oga* meaning ‘father’ and ‘superior’) agree with Egbokhare’s (2003) description of the vocabulary of NP used here to portray the religious nature of Nigerians as exemplified in the students’ conversations. This example also emphasizes the complex context of activities in the university environment where series of goals are achieved simultaneously by undergraduates. On NP, a 22-year old male student reiterated that though NP is mainly spoken in informal contexts, it is a powerful communication medium that evokes Nigerian linguistic ideology and identity. It is also established that the linguistic power and ideologies in the use of NP has evolved in the consciousness that it is a common heritage and national language identity among Nigerians (including university students) even in the diaspora (Muo, Onuoha & Uyanne, 2017; Affla, 2023). Nigerian English and NP construe the dimensions of discourses that enact the peculiarity of the sociocultural and socio-religious worldview of Nigerians as exemplified in premarital ceremonies and religious participation shown in excerpts 6 and 7 above. The use of Nigerian English and NP by the participants is a conscious attempt to decolonize conversations within the university contexts



4.4 Language for enactment of ethnolinguistic identity

Ethnolinguistic identity is linked with language use in foregrounding cultural practices of a given speech community. Parajuli (2018) argues that language is a social interactional tool that plays key roles in the nuances and shaping of cultural and ethnolinguistic identities. In some universities, and particularly in Malaysia, the use of indigenous languages among students are aspects of the contextualization of their ethnolinguistic identities (Ting & Abidin, 2023). Such labels are often derived from cultural backgrounds of participants to communicate their collective experiences, social realities, cultural norms and historical traditions. In multilingual university setting, students create interactional contexts where they rehearse their ethnolinguistic affiliations through the use of mother tongue(s) to reproduce linguistic belongings and localized concerns as presented below.

Excerpt 8

4A: Ihe ha si ka-anyi mee bu ka anyi chọputa ndi-Igbo nile nọ na program di'iche-iche ka a hụ na anyi n'ile gbakotara aka ọnu ruo nwe mmeri.

4B: Eh, I di na-otu bu ike!

Excerpt 9

4C: Mon bere ibi tí won tin se ounje, ewédú áti àmàlà, kin lee je kin sii lókun lati wọ awọn yàrá ikeko.

4D: Mo sèlérí lati mún ọ lọ sílè ounje naa lola.

In excerpt 8, speakers 4A and 4B use Igbo language to discuss the resolutions of the previous meeting of Igbo Students' Association. The former reminded the latter that the task given to Igbo students by their leaders on campus is to identity and unite all Igbo students and ensure they achieve the desired academic success in their respective disciplines. The latter agreed, and added that it is in demonstration of unity, and unity is strength. Excerpt 9 is in Yoruba language. Speakers 4C requests to know where they serve Yoruba cuisines (*ewedu* and *amala*) to eat and have strength to attend classes while 4D promises to take him to such eateries the following day.

Igbo and Yoruba are major and national languages in Nigeria. The conversation in Igbo between the two students in excerpt 8 is a representation of several ethnolinguistic groups and how they hold meetings to canvass the interest and success of their kinsmen in the complex university environment. The two students are bearers of the ideology of students of Igbo extraction which propagates 'unity is strength' as aspects of sociocultural beliefs of the Igbo people. Excerpt 9 presents the quest for a reconnection with the cultural roots of the participants represented here by the mention of specific indigenous cuisines that construct food and cultural identity of Yoruba people. The two excerpts introduce the complex strategies students adopt (uniting with people from same origin and eating favorite local food) to perform several academic tasks. Studies have established that indigenous languages are used to create varied ethnolinguistic identities, and interpret speakers' shared values, customs and history that resonate cultural practices in the Nigerian multilingual environment (Udoh & Emmanuel, 2020; Akintunde & Ohiare-Udebu, 2021). As demonstrated in the interaction, the excerpts in Igbo and Yoruba languages are used to



establish the relevance of ethnolinguistic affiliation and sense of belonging for plurilingual students in the negotiation of their identity. Uwen, Ehimikhuai and Ellah (2025, p. 138) contend that such “labels are formulated through the people’s consistent pattern of behaviour, the language they speak, their cultural beliefs and participation in ethnic-based institutional associations that practice ethnic ideologies and attitudes.” Corroborating this claim, two male students aged 20 and 23 separately reported that aside from speaking indigenous languages to perform ethnolinguistic identity of participants, using the languages further create a bond of intimacy and trust, and provide the medium where individual challenges in the university could be shared and resolved. Drawing on insights from Postcolonial pragmatics and Edulingualism, discursive situations involving the use of indigenous language(s) help to reinforce ethnic alignments and ingroup allegiances, and social inclusion and biases that attract the offer of some privileges for the achievement of goals within the larger school contexts.

4.5 Intermixing of languages as depiction of plurilingual identity

The final instance where undergraduates of the selected institution exemplify performance of their linguistic repertoires is through the intermixing of languages in their communicative activities. It is a common language practice among speakers that depicts the sociolinguistic situation in Nigeria which allows the co-existence of many mutually unintelligible languages (Uwen & Okafor, 2025). This language practice often manifests in code-switching and code-mixing. Chen (2019, p. 122) posits that code-switching and code-mixing are “dynamic conversational phenomena in interpersonal interactions, that is, an alternation between two or more languages, dialectal variants, and language registers.” In Moradi and Chen’s (2022) study on English-Chinese bilingual undergraduates, the authors argue that there are communication conditions and social motivations that stimulate the use of code-switching and code-mixing to perform sociopragmatic functions as aspects of multilingual identity performance by students. Examples of such intermixing of languages by students are shown below.

Excerpt 10

5A: Why are you so quiet?

5B: *Nkikemeke nwed ofon.*

5C: My sister, just cheer up, that is done already.

5A: You can make it up in the exams.

5B: *Nso ke ndidoho nsiyene mmi ke nkibeghe udomo?*

Excerpt 11

5D: *Tiv lahadi* will hold *iwer jimin chive* second semester exams.

5E: That will be *mnzogh man iaan íse tese* our rich *gado*.

Excerpt 12

5F: *Ana jala omena ga* phone?

5G: *Wa* my father. *Nchang nnala okpo* for the books.

5H: *Nalam egwu. Sapa dey* campus!

Excerpt 10 is a code-switched (English and Efik) interaction among three Efik students, where speaker 5B laments on her poor performance in a concluded test, even while she is encouraged by



speakers 5A and 5C to brace up. She expresses fear on how she will approach her parents should she fail in the exams eventually. The code-mixed (Tiv and English) interaction in excerpt 11 centres on an upcoming Tiv week where those from the ethnic group are expected to showcase their rich cultural heritage. Excerpt 12 and the last consists of code-mixed elements from English, Erei, students' slang and NP. In the conversation, speaker 5F asks 5G who the latter is speaking on phone to, her reply indicates that she was asking her father for money to buy recommended books. On hearing this, speaker 5F encourages 5G to request for more money to enable them feed properly. The intermixed languages (English and Efik in excerpt 10, English and Tiv in excerpt 11 and English, Erei, slang and NP in excerpt 12) form the discourses that reverberate the various tasks students perform in the university as well construct their plurilingual identities. On this, Akande, Okanlawon and Akinwale's (2011) study on language attitude across tertiary institutions show that Nigerian university students (irrespective of their academic disciplines) are positively inclined to the use of codeswitching and code-mixing between English, NP and indigenous languages to re-enact their plurilingual identity within the school setting. In terms of functions, Romansyah and Adam (2023) acknowledge that language intermixing is a language behavior of multilingual characters aimed at instantiating social, gender, ethnic and class identities. Two female students aged 19 and 22 asserted that the act of code-mixing and code-switching regularly occur in undergraduates' speech activities. They added that apart from indicating students' competencies in many languages, the language practice serves in specific circumstances to exclude others from participating in certain discourses. Generally, code-mixing and code-switching are interactional strategies used when switching topics, they also serve to complement languages, show solidarity with the listener and establish intimacy. In other instances, they function as tools for social inclusion and exclusion, and for the expression of multilingual identity. Applying the two theories, it is evident that students' abilities to use and switch between multiple languages flexibly help them attend to their communication demands, strengthen their relationships, and foster the performance of multilingual and multicultural identities which are aspects of decolonized language practices in postcolonial multiethnic discourses.

Conclusion

Drawing on insights from the frameworks of Postcolonial pragmatics and Edulingualism, the study has demonstrated how language practices in the macro Nigerian multilingual environment is variedly reproduced by plurilingual students in a micro university context to capture how multilingual resources are deployed to achieve goals in educational settings. The situation implies that institutions of learning are fertile grounds for practicing linguistic repertoires learnt at home and in the society. So, plurilingual students developed and were developing linguistic repertoires from lived experiences before and during their integration into the university system where they perform communicative competencies in the different languages. Students exemplify this language experiences in various social contexts to advance their studies, negotiate for appropriate language use, and develop and maintain social networks among themselves for career realization. As we observed, the plurilingual students depend on their linguistic repertoires to achieve a number of goals as well as to develop multilingual skills, learn various capabilities, perform identities, socialize across academic disciplines, and negotiate with other agentive and communicative structures that support the performance of their academic tasks and achievement



of goals in the university. Through translanguaging and creations from multilingual resources, the plurilingual students develop agentive power and potentials through continuous participation in multilingual interactions to regulate, actualize, possess, dominate and utilize such discourses for self-realization, self-efficacy and linguistic autonomy.

As demonstrated in the study, performance of multilingual identities is re-enacted in social contexts where there is the availability of plurilingual interactants. This is because the participants and contexts are the agentive forces that identify and select appropriate (varieties of) languages for various tasks and/or goals which in turn help in shaping the structuring of interactions and regulate how set goals are achieved. Developing and participating in multilingual identity performance and activities by students, as we observed, also helped to enhance language learning motivations, preservation and sustenance of language behavior that restore confidence and self-belonging by widening the multilingual space to engage in, exclude and accommodate participants while practicing multilingualism. In a multilingual social context therefore, different (registers and/or varieties of) languages perform different roles, and such situation instantiates the fact that the prestige of certain linguistic identities varies due to the discursive functions the particular language performs in a dense multilingual setting. In the study, the plurilingual students do this by using English language (EAP and ESP) for indexation of (cross-)disciplinary identity, slang for ingroup identity construction, Nigerian English and NP to showcase national linguistic identity, Nigerian indigenous languages to re-enact ethnolinguistic identity and intermixed languages to rehearse plurilingual identity. These language practices help to reinforce the understanding that participating in multilingual interactions has positive implications for students' multiple languages' literacies, linguistic accommodation, academic attainment and social networking which are the core objectives of ideal students.

Related to the languages spoken in other Nigeria's tertiary institutions, the selected institution is a micro representation of English language-dominant universities in Nigeria. As observed through the excerpts and participants' views, English language dominance occurs in the communicative activities among university students. As it is the case in most colonized multilingual nations, the linguistic diverse situation makes English efficient means by which speakers from different ethnolinguistic enclaves connect to foster cohesion towards the achievement of their goals in and outside the school environment. As the language of instruction in schools, other languages would only continue to play supportive roles and spoken in limited contexts while English occupies a widening contexts of communication. This study is significant because it contributes to existing studies on language issues in English language-dominant institutions, multilingual universities and plurilingual students and how language choices are ideologically regulated and utilized to perform multilingual identities to achieve individual and collective goals. From the sociolinguistic perspectives, the study has enriched available literature on plurilingual students' language behavior and how language choices in university settings resonate the consciousness across codes and when to use a particular language to respond to the situational communication needs. The study also has implications as it advances the realities in terms of language practices in postcolonial Anglophone African universities where plurilingual students are consciously decolonizing their communicative activities for broader achievement of their academic goals which English language alone cannot offer. Multilingual practices in



university education is a major integrating force as underscored in the study, it calls for language policy change by government and universities and proposition of varying theories to account for the effective utilization of the such linguistic situations for the broader benefits of students and the society. The study has expanded research horizons for sociolinguistic studies that would expand knowledge on the roles of languages in tertiary institutions and how the practices could be harnessed to foster unity, increase social bonding and enhance national development in Nigeria's complex and heterogeneous situation.

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