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**LANGUAGE CHOICE IN THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF NIGERIAN
ELECTIONS**

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Abstract

Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with more than five hundred indigenous languages coexisting with English and Nigerian Pidgin. Political actors in the country constantly negotiate this multilingual landscape by strategically selecting languages that align with particular constituencies and rhetorical goals. This paper examines how English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages are deployed in political discourse during election campaign. The paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the sociolinguistic theory of code-switching to analyse a corpus of fifty political speeches and campaign materials drawn from the 2023 general elections. This is complemented by audience perception data from two hundred respondents across Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Enugu. Findings reveal that English dominates official contexts such as televised debates and policy documents where credibility and international legitimacy are foregrounded, while Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages are mobilised in campaign rallies to index solidarity, grassroots belonging and ethnic authenticity. The paper contends that code-switching emerges as a strategic resource for constructing multiple identities within a single communicative event. Audience responses indicate that young urban Nigerians value the use of Pidgin as authentic and relatable, while rural audiences perceive indigenous language use as a marker of trust. The paper concludes that language choice in Nigerian politics is not incidental but constitutes a central mechanism of persuasion, identity construction and democratic participation. The study contributes to the global literature on political communication by showing how African multilingual contexts complicate dominant models of political discourse analysis.

Keywords: Campaign rally, CDA, code-switching, political discourse, indigenous language, Nigerian Pidgin and elections.

Introduction

Language plays a fundamental role in politics. It is the primary medium through which political actors articulate visions, mobilise support, negotiate power and construct identities. In multilingual societies such as Nigeria, the politics of language is even more pronounced because linguistic choices signal not only ideological positions but also social allegiances and cultural boundaries. Nigeria presents one of the most complex linguistic ecologies in the world with more than five hundred indigenous languages alongside English and Nigerian Pidgin. English functions as the official language inherited from colonial rule, Nigerian Pidgin operates as an informal lingua franca with wide coverage across class and ethnic boundaries, while Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo serve as major regional languages. These coexist with a wide array of minority languages that continue to sustain community identities.

Electioneering campaign in Nigeria illustrate the strategic deployment of this multilingual repertoire. Politicians frequently switch between English, Pidgin and indigenous languages depending on context and audience. At a rally in Kano, for example, a presidential candidate might begin in English to project authority and national outlook, switch to Hausa to mobilise local identity, and employ Pidgin for humorous asides aimed at younger or less formally educated audiences. In Lagos a similar candidate may employ Yoruba proverbs interspersed with English and Pidgin to establish solidarity with local voters while still maintaining a cosmopolitan image. Such practices are not random but deeply patterned and ideologically loaded.

Scholars of political communication have long recognised that language choice is central to understanding power dynamics. CDA has shown how politicians use language to naturalise ideologies and reproduce power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2021). Sociolinguistic studies of code-switching emphasise that alternating between languages is often a marked or

unmarked choice that signals identity, solidarity, or distance (Myers-Scotton, 1993). In Nigeria, diverse researches (Odebode & Bello, 2019; Ajulo, 2020; Igboanusi, 2022) have examined aspects of campaign rhetoric, Nigerian English features, and media discourse, but a comprehensive analysis of how multiple languages interact in actual campaign contexts remains limited.

This paper addresses that gap by empirically investigating language choice in Nigerian political discourse with a focus on the 2023 elections. The study asks three key questions. First, how are English, Pidgin and indigenous languages deployed across different campaign contexts. Second, what rhetorical and sociolinguistic functions does code-switching serve in political discourse. Third, how do audiences perceive the credibility and relatability of politicians' language choices. To answer these questions, the study combines critical discourse analysis of campaign speeches with audience surveys across four major Nigerian cities.

The study is significant in several respects. It demonstrates how multilingualism functions as a political resource in Africa's largest democracy, offering insights for comparative research in other multilingual societies. It advances theoretical understanding of how code-switching intersects with power and ideology. Finally, it highlights the implications of language choice for inclusivity and democratic participation in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The study of language choice in political discourse has received attention in different regions of the world. Political communication scholars have long established that the language politicians use is never neutral but is selected to index power, solidarity, legitimacy or difference. In Europe and North America, critical discourse analysts, such as Fairclough (1995) and Wodak (2021), have demonstrated how political elites utilise language to

normalise ideologies and maintain dominant structures of power. Studies in Latin America and Asia have equally revealed the interplay of multilingualism and populist discourse where politicians alternate between languages or registers to align with diverse constituencies (Joseph, 2006; Heller, 2011).

Within the African context, scholars (Odebode and Bello 2019; Ajulo 2020; Igboanusi 2022 etc) have emphasised the political implications of multilingualism. Blommaert (2014) demonstrated how state ideologies in Tanzania were tied to linguistic hierarchies, while Banda (2018) examined how code-switching in Southern African parliaments served to mediate authority and inclusivity. These studies highlight that in multilingual societies language choice is an essential site where citizenship, participation and exclusion are negotiated. Nigeria offers an especially rich site of inquiry because of its vast linguistic diversity and complex socio-political history.

Research on Nigerian political discourse has focused on different angles. Odebode and Bello (2019) analysed campaign rhetoric and identified how metaphors and proverbs functioned as persuasive strategies. Ajulo (2020) examined code-switching in Nigerian political debates, noting that politicians use English for official authority but often switch into Pidgin or indigenous languages to secure grassroots credibility. Igboanusi (2022) extended this work by showing that political language in Nigeria is deeply tied to identity construction and ethnic alignment. While these studies provide important insights, there remains a gap in systematic empirical analysis of multilingual choices across different regions and campaign contexts. This directly bears on the use of Pidgin based on the location and context of the speech situation.

Nigerian Pidgin has been a subject of linguistic inquiry for decades but its political role is less studied. Faraclas (2013) identified Pidgin as the fastest growing lingua franca in Nigeria,

widely used across ethnic lines. Recent research (Bamgbose, 2011; Faraclas 2013; Ehineni 2020) has shown that Pidgin carries symbolic associations with youth culture, urban identity and informality. Yet its integration into political communication requires further exploration. Similarly, studies on Nigerian English emphasise its indigenisation and unique lexico-semantic features (Bamgbose, 2011; Adegbiya, 2004), but less attention has been paid to its function as the language of elite politics in contrast with grassroots varieties.

The present study, therefore, situates itself at the intersection of critical discourse analysis and sociolinguistics by examining how English, Pidgin and indigenous languages are mobilised in actual campaign events. It contributes to existing literature by combining textual analysis with audience perception data to show how language choice both reflects and constructs political realities.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is guided by three interrelated theoretical perspectives. The first is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which views language as a social practice that both reflects and reproduces power relations (Fairclough, 1995). CDA allows us to interrogate how politicians deploy language to project authority, mobilise solidarity and manage ideological positions. In other words, it provides the tools to link linguistic choices with broader issues of power and legitimacy.

The second perspective is the Markedness Model of Code-switching developed by Myers-Scotton (1993). According to this model, speakers make either unmarked choices, which conform to normative expectations, or marked choices, which signal shifts in identity or power relations. In political discourse, code-switching is often marked, drawing attention to shifts between elite authority and grassroots connection. The model is particularly relevant to

the Nigerian context where the alternation between English, Pidgin and indigenous languages carries strong indexical meanings.

The third perspective is the theory of Indexicality as articulated by Silverstein (2003). Indexicality refers to the way linguistic forms point to social meanings beyond their literal content. For example, the use of Yoruba proverbs by a candidate in Lagos indexes cultural authenticity and belonging, while switching into Pidgin at a youth rally indexes informality and solidarity. These indexical associations are crucial for understanding how language choice functions symbolically in Nigerian elections.

Taken together, these frameworks allow for a multidimensional analysis. CDA situates the analysis within structures of power and ideology, the Markedness Model explains the strategic use of code-switching, and indexicality highlights the symbolic meanings attached to specific language choices. By integrating these perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive account of multilingual political discourse in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative dominant mixed-method design that combined CDA of campaign texts with quantitative survey data on audience perceptions. The aim was to capture both the production and reception of multilingual political discourse in Nigeria. While discourse analysis provided insights into how language was strategically deployed by politicians, surveys and focus groups revealed how different segments of the electorate interpreted these linguistic choices.

The primary data consisted of fifty political speeches and campaign materials drawn from the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. These included televised debates, rally speeches, party manifestos, radio jingles, and social media campaign videos. The materials were purposively

sampled to ensure regional representation across the North, Southwest and Southeast, and to include both presidential and gubernatorial candidates.

In addition to textual data, survey and focus group data were collected from four major cities: Lagos, Abuja, Kano and Enugu. A total of two hundred respondents participated in the survey, while smaller focus group sessions were conducted in each city. Respondents were selected to reflect age, gender and educational diversity. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions that explored attitudes towards the use of English, Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages in political communication.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed to analyse the campaign texts. Each speech was transcribed and coded for language choice, code-switching instances, and rhetorical functions. Attention was paid to the contexts where English, Pidgin or indigenous languages were chosen and how these choices related to authority, solidarity, identity or persuasion.

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, presented in percentages and frequency tables. Open-ended responses and focus group discussions were thematically analysed to complement the quantitative findings. The integration of these methods allowed for triangulation of data and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Survey Results

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of survey respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	54%
	Female	46%
Age	18–29 years	42%

Variable	Category	Percentage
	30–44 years	36%
	45+ years	22%
Education:	Secondary or below	30%
	Tertiary	70%
Region	Lagos	25%
	Abuja	25%
	Kano	25%
	Enugu	25%

Table 2 presents audience preferences for the language politicians should use when addressing voters.

Table 2: Preferred Language for Political Communication

Language	Percentage of Respondents
English	40%
Nigerian Pidgin	30%
Indigenous language	25%
No preference	5%

Table 3 summarizes perceived credibility associated with language choice.

Table 3: Perceived Credibility of Politicians by Language Choice

Language	High Credibility (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)
English	65	20	15

Language	High Credibility (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)
Nigerian Pidgin	40	35	25
Indigenous language	55	25	20

From the Focus Group Discussions, Urban youth frequently described Pidgin as “real” and “relatable,” associating it with honesty and grassroots belonging. Older participants and tertiary-educated respondents tended to value English as the language of competence and policy seriousness. Rural respondents expressed greater trust in indigenous languages, often linking them to cultural authenticity and communal identity.

Findings and Discussion

Language Distribution in Campaign Speeches

The analysis of fifty campaign texts revealed that English dominated formal settings such as televised debates, manifesto launches and press conferences. In contrast, Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages were more common in rallies, town hall meetings and social media interactions. Out of the total sample, 60 percent of the speeches were primarily delivered in English, 25 percent in Nigerian Pidgin, while 15 percent made extensive use of indigenous languages either exclusively or in combination with English.

This distribution reflects a strategic adaptation to audience and medium. English served as the language of authority and national reach, while Pidgin and indigenous languages were used to signal solidarity and local belonging. The data confirms earlier scholarly observations that multilingualism in Nigerian politics is not random but systematically deployed to maximise resonance with different publics (Adegbite, 2019; Opeibi, 2020).

Excerpt 1: English as Authority and Policy Seriousness

A presidential candidate in Abuja during a live debate declared:

“Our administration will prioritize economic diversification and investment in renewable energy. We must move from consumption to production and place Nigeria on the path of sustainable development.”

This excerpt illustrates how English is used to project authority, intellectual competence and international legitimacy. The lexical choices—*diversification*, *investment*, *sustainable development*—belong to a technocratic register that reinforces the perception of credibility among educated and urban audiences. Survey data supported this, as 65 percent of respondents associated English with high credibility (see Table 3).

Excerpt 2: Pidgin as Solidarity and Grassroots Appeal

At a campaign rally in Lagos, another candidate declared:

“My people, una know sey I no go lie give una. Dis government wey we dey plan go carry everybody along. Na we go chop together, no be only dem for top.”

This switch to Nigerian Pidgin evokes solidarity, grassroots belonging and a rejection of elitism. Words like *una*, *no go lie*, *chop together* appeal to the lived experiences of ordinary citizens. Focus group respondents from Lagos described this style as “relatable” and “closer to the street.” About 30 percent of survey respondents preferred Pidgin for political communication, with young people dominating this group. This supports previous research that associates Pidgin with inclusivity and urban identity (Faraclas, 2013). However, the use of the register, “*Na we go chop together, no be only dem for top*” suggests that the politician here plays on identification with the grassroots by excluding himself from the people at the top whereas he is part of the class of people at the top. His choices of the Pidgin words, “we”

and “dem” sets an oppositionary order in which the masses of the people is pitched against the elite.

Excerpt 3: Indigenous Language as Cultural Authenticity

In Kano, a gubernatorial candidate began his rally with Hausa:

“Yan’uwa na, lokaci ya yi da zamu dauki mataki mu kare amfaninmu da martabar mu. Ina tare da ku kuma ba zan taba barin ku ba.”

(Translation: *My brothers, the time has come for us to take action to protect our resources and our dignity. I am with you and will never abandon you.*)

Here, Hausa functions as a marker of intimacy and cultural authenticity. Audience responses were enthusiastic, with chants in Hausa following the speech. Survey results showed that 55 percent of respondents associated indigenous languages with credibility, particularly among rural and less formally educated participants. This aligns with Eze’s (2021) finding that local languages often carry moral weight in Nigerian political culture.

Patterns of Code-Switching

Several politicians alternated between English and local languages within the same speech. For example, in Enugu a candidate began in English:

“We must address the infrastructural deficit and ensure every local government has equitable access to resources.”

Then he shifted to Igbo:

“Umunnem, anyi aghaghi ikwe ka ha jee na Abuja kwuo maka anyi. Anyi kwesiri ikwu maka onwe anyi.”

(Translation: *My people, we must not allow them in Abuja to speak for us. We must speak for ourselves.*)

This strategic alternation achieved a dual effect. English established national credibility, while Igbo secured ethnic solidarity and emotional identification. Such blending illustrates what Blommaert (2010) describes as the polycentricity of discourse, where speakers orient simultaneously to multiple centres of authority. The choice of the use of the word, “My people” speaks to both the educated elites and the indigenous sensitivity through identification. The politician in question here presents himself as one belonging to the people in spite of his education and elitism.

Audience Perceptions of Language Choice

Survey and focus group data highlighted generational and educational differences. Urban youth emphasized the importance of accessibility and often favoured Pidgin, which they considered less pretentious than English. Educated professionals viewed English as essential for policy clarity and seriousness. Rural and older participants emphasised the trustworthiness of indigenous languages, noting that “when a politician speaks our tongue, he remembers us.”

Table 4: Audience Perception by Demographics

Group	Preferred Language Reasoning	
Urban youth (18–29)	Nigerian Pidgin	Relatability, honesty
Educated professionals	English	Policy clarity, authority
Rural/older voters	Indigenous language	Trust, cultural identity

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that language choice in Nigerian political discourse is far from arbitrary. Politicians draw on the semiotic resources of English, Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages to align themselves with different constituencies. English constructs technocratic authority and appeals to educated elites. Nigerian Pidgin creates a sense of solidarity and positions the speaker as part of the grassroots. Indigenous languages anchor cultural authenticity and reinforce ethnic belonging.

This dynamic supports the argument that multilingualism in Nigeria is not merely a communicative necessity but a political resource that is actively negotiated in the electoral space. It also reflects the broader sociolinguistic reality of Nigeria where linguistic hierarchies mirror social, educational and generational divides (Bamgbose, 2018). What is worrisome for language policy and planners however, is the low number of participants who prefer English and Pidgin over indigenous languages.

The survey responses and FGDs aligned with discourse data in three key ways. One is that across cities, respondents valued English as the language of competence and seriousness. As one Abuja respondent put it, *“If a leader cannot speak English well, I will not believe he can manage Nigeria”*. This perception reinforced why politicians rely on English in formal debates and policy speeches. Whereas one’s ability to govern has nothing to do with competence in English speakability, many Nigerians still appear to mistake communication competence with competence in English language speakability. Second is that the use of Pidgin has nothing to do with illiteracy. Lagos youth participants described Pidgin-speaking politicians as “down-to-earth” and “not fake,” whereas the educated elites see it as informal for policy communication. This explained why candidates frequently switched into Pidgin during street rallies and mass mobilization events. Lastly, is that indigenous languages are threatened since the codification of government policies is mostly rendered in English, and politicians struggle to communicate them effectively during rallies. As a result, and in some

cases, politicians use code-switching as a persuasive device. They often opened speeches in English to set a formal tone, switched to Pidgin for emotional connection, and used indigenous languages for localized persuasion. This is evident in Abuja Mega Rally for the APC in the 2023 Elections where one of the party chieftains says:

“Nigerians, the time has come for change. We are ready to build a nation that works for everyone. My brothers and sisters, ba za mu bar ku ba. We go stand gidigba for una. Together, we move forward.”

This excerpt demonstrates trilingual alternation within a single speech event: English frames the national vision, Hausa assures solidarity in the northern linguistic repertoire, and Pidgin closes with a colloquial affirmation (*we go stand gidigba for una*). Such shifts reflect what Gumperz (1982) identified as *situational code-switching*, where language choice is tied to shifts in audience and topic.

Implications of Language Choices for Nigerian Democracy

The implications of this study are significant for the democratic process in Nigeria. First, the use of multiple languages underscores the necessity of linguistic inclusivity in encouraging participation. When politicians communicate only in English, large portions of the population are excluded or alienated. Conversely, when Pidgin or indigenous languages are used strategically, political discourse becomes more accessible and engaging. This enhances citizens' sense of belonging and potentially increases electoral participation.

Second, the strategic use of language also raises concerns about manipulation. Politicians may exploit linguistic choices to project false solidarity or to incite ethnic sentiments. The deployment of indigenous languages in particular can be double-edged, serving both as a unifying force within ethnic groups and as a divisive tool against others. Thus, while language can democratize access, it can also deepen polarisation.

Third, the prominence of Pidgin suggests an evolving linguistic landscape in Nigerian politics. As urbanisation, youth participation and digital communication expand, Pidgin may increasingly serve as the bridge language of politics. This raises questions about its institutional recognition. Should Nigerian Pidgin be formally integrated into civic education, voter sensitization campaigns and political broadcasting? The study suggests that its role is too significant to remain informal.

Conclusion

This study investigated the dynamics of language choice in Nigerian political discourse,. It focused on the interplay between English, Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages in the 2023 elections. It used CDA of campaign speeches and survey data from four cities to demonstrate that language use in politics is both a symbolic and strategic act. It contends that politicians mobilize multiple linguistic repertoires not merely for communication but for constructing authority, solidarity and cultural belonging.

The analysis revealed that English remains the dominant language of formal political communication, associated with competence, seriousness and national reach. Nigerian Pidgin, although often stigmatised in elite circles, emerged as a powerful resource for signaling authenticity and solidarity, particularly among urban youth and working-class audiences. Indigenous languages carried significant symbolic weight in regional contexts, anchoring political trust in cultural and communal identity. The deliberate alternation among these languages reflects the hybrid and layered nature of Nigerian political identities, where leaders must simultaneously project national authority, grassroots credibility and ethnic belonging.

Survey results further confirmed the ambivalence surrounding language preferences. While a plurality of respondents valued English, Pidgin and indigenous languages all carried unique

associations of credibility and relatability. Focus group discussions highlighted how these perceptions were shaped by class, education and geography. The evidence suggests that multilingual political discourse is not only an effective persuasive strategy but also a mirror of Nigeria's broader sociolinguistic realities.

The implications of these are significant for both scholarship and practice. For scholars of sociolinguistics, the study reinforces the centrality of code-switching and language ideology in the study of political communication in multilingual societies.

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