



JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

ISSN : 3122-0479

DOI – <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18038402>

Volume 1 No 2 December (2025): Journal of English Studies

<https://joesfudutsinma.com.ng/joes/index.php/one/article/view/54>

joesfudma@gmail.com

**TONALITIES OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS
OF NUPE LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES IN A MULTILINGUAL NIGERIAN STATE**

Dr. Theophilus Danjuma Sheshi

National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies,

Kuru-Jos,

Plateau State,

Nigeria

Email: theosheshi@gmail.com

&

Dr. Bala Alhaji Alfa

Department of Languages,

The Federal Polytechnic,

Bida, Niger State,

Nigeria

Email: alfabalaharuna@gmail.com

Abstract

While the Nupe language has been well-documented structurally, its sociocultural and ideological dimensions remain critically underexplored. This article addresses this gap, moving beyond descriptive linguistics to employ a language ideologies framework. We argue that Nupe's structural features—particularly its tonality—are not merely grammatical but are intensely ideologised, enlisted in metalinguistic discourses that authenticate cultural identity and police social boundaries. Through ethnographic fieldwork in Niger State, Nigeria, we analyse language contact with English and Nigerian Pidgin not as simple borrowing, but as a strategic negotiation of modernity. This study contends that the language's future depends not on external pressures alone but on internal ideological struggles, offering a new model for understanding language vitality in minority contexts.

Keywords

Nupe language, language ideologies, linguistic ecology, sociolinguistics, language contact, cultural linguistics, tonology, digital communication, Nigeria

Introduction

The academic study of the Nupe language has been largely circumscribed by a foundational, yet limiting, tradition of structuralist description. Seminal works by Banfield (1914) and Smith (1967) provided an indispensable phonological and lexical catalogue, establishing *what* the language is. However, this paradigm, for all its empirical value, treats language as a decontextualised object, creating a scholarly silence regarding its social life—how it is used, perceived, and imbued with meaning by its speakers. Consequently, a significant gap exists: we lack an understanding of how Nupe functions as a constitutive force in social life. The problem, therefore, is the disconnect between the well-described structures of Nupe and the under-theorised social and ideological work these structures perform in a multilingual, modernising Nigeria.

Research	Aim,	Objectives,	and	Questions
This study aims to investigate how the Nupe language serves as a semiotic resource for negotiating identity and cultural value within Nigeria's complex linguistic ecology. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:				

1. To interrogate the metalinguistic discourses surrounding Nupe's most ideologised structures, particularly its tonology.
2. To analyse patterns of language contact and alternation as strategic, socially meaningful practices.
3. To examine how these micro-level ideological processes interact with macro-level ecological pressures, including digital communication.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do Nupe speakers ideologise specific linguistic features (like tone) to construct authenticity and social boundaries?

2. In what ways do practices like proverb use and code-switching function as tools for negotiating tradition and modernity?
3. How do new communicative contexts, such as digital spaces, reshape Nupe language ideologies and practices?

Theoretical Framework and Thesis

To transcend the descriptive impasse, this study is anchored within the framework of **language ideologies**—"sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation of perceived language structure and use" (Kroskrity, 2000, p. 8). We specifically employ the semiotic processes of iconisation, fractal recursivity, and erasure (Irvine & Gal, 2000) to analyse how linguistic features become emblems of social identity. This micro-level analysis is contextualised within the macro framework of **linguistic ecology** (Haugen, 1972; Mufwene, 2001), which allows us to situate Nupe within Nigeria's multilingual ecosystem and its attendant socio-political pressures.

The overarching thesis is that the Nupe language is a dynamic and potent semiotic resource through which its speakers engage in an ongoing project of identity work. We offer an original argument: the language's future will be determined less by abstract globalisation and more by internal ideological struggles over its value, meaning, and utility (Gal, 1978). Thus, our contribution is not new structural data but a new interpretive model for understanding Nupe—and by extension, other minority languages—as a site of continuous cultural negotiation.

Literature Review

The Descriptive Foundation and Its Limits

The cornerstone of Nupe linguistics is structural. Banfield's (1914) dictionary and Smith's (1967) phonological account are foundational texts that systematically catalogued the language. However, their structuralist orientation, characteristic of their time, abstracted the language from its speakers and social contexts. This created a corpus strong on the 'what' but silent on the 'how' and 'why' of Nupe as a social practice, establishing the clear need for the present study's ideological turn.

Theoretical Precedents and Identifying the Gap

This study inserts the Nupe case into broader theoretical conversations. It engages with theories of language ideologies (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Kroskrity, 2000) to understand how linguistic features are loaded with social meaning. It draws on linguistic ecology (Mufwene, 2001) to frame language contact as competition within a socio-historical environment. Furthermore, it builds on regional research on language attitudes (Adegbija, 1994) and comparative linguistics (Blench, 2013) to situate Nupe within a West African context.

A critical synthesis reveals a disconnect between the granular structural description of Nupe and the macro-level overviews of regional language contact. This paper fills this void by building a bridge between them. It uses the tools of ideological and ecological analysis to connect the details of linguistic structure (e.g., tone) to the large-scale forces of social change, offering a more holistic and refined understanding of Nupe as a contested social practice. This integrated approach constitutes the paper's unique intervention.

Methodology

Ethnographic and Discourse-Centred Approach

This study employs a qualitative, mixed-methods design, prioritising the analysis of language in its social context. Data collection involved participant observation conducted over 12 months of fieldwork in Niger State, Nigeria, focusing on sociolinguistic ecology in action across diverse community settings. Semi-structured interviews (n=45) with a purposively selected sample representing key demographic variables (age, gender, occupation, education level) were designed to elicit language ideologies through questions about perceptions of "good" Nupe, language importance, and domain-specific usage. Recordings of naturalistic speech captured metapragmatic discourse in family conversations, market interactions, and radio programmes. Document and media analysis included collected written materials in Nupe (religious texts, educational pamphlets) and social media content from Nupe-language forums.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Data analysis followed an iterative process. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of interview transcripts and field notes employed initial open coding followed by grouping into broader analytical themes (e.g., Authenticity and Purity, Utility and Modernity). Conversation analysis (Auer, 1984) examined instances of naturalistic code-switching and borrowing for sequential and pragmatic functions. Discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) explored proverbs (ècè) and metapragmatic comments as vehicles for cultural values. The researcher's positionality was navigated through reflexivity, with informed consent obtained from all participants and protocols ensuring anonymity through pseudonyms, under approved ethical protocols.

Findings

The Metalinguistic Salience of Tonal Distinction

Participants consistently identified phonemic tone as the defining feature of linguistic competence. A clear distinction was made between rural speakers ("deep Nupe"), characterised by accurate tone, and urban speakers ("shallow Nupe"), characterised by tonal erosion, with the latter laden with social and moral judgment. Elder participants particularly emphasised this distinction, with one stating, "When they speak without the tones, it is like a song without a melody. You hear the words, but the meaning is weak and easily lost. They are losing the heart of the language."

The Pragmatic Deployment of 'Ganmaganzhi' (Proverbs)

The use of proverbs (*ganmagan*) was observed as a strategic, marked rhetorical move concentrated in specific discursive contexts: dispute resolutions, elder-led gatherings, counselling sessions, and formal speeches. Their deployment consistently functioned to shift conversations from personal or specific disputes to general traditional principles. For example, in a recorded community conflict mediation, an elder concluded his intervention with the proverb, "*Dangan funfuru 'yi, eka yikan o*" (You cannot bend a smoked fish without breaking it), effectively invoking traditional wisdom to resolve the dispute.

Patterns of Language Contact and Alternation

Language contact followed a structured hierarchy based on semantic domain and social context. The lexical borrowing of English nouns for modern technological and institutional concepts (e.g., *kɔnpwuta* [computer], *kwontaya* [coal-tar/Tarred Road], *gómína* [governor]) was universal

and unstigmatised, filling acknowledged lexical gaps. Code-switching to English served specific pragmatic functions: quoting authority figures, discussing topics related to formal education or technology, and expressing concepts where Nupe translation was perceived as cumbersome. A clear domain specificity emerged, with Nupe dominating home and ceremonial contexts while English/Nigerian Pidgin English featured prominently in discussions of work, education, and politics.

Analysis and Discussion

Iconisation in Practice: Tonology as a Cultural Boundary Marker

Our analysis reveals that Nupe's tonology is intensely ideologised (Woolard, 1998). It is iconised (Irvine & Gal, 2000): the phonological feature of tone becomes a concrete emblem of cultural fidelity. The perceived erosion of tone among youth is not just a linguistic observation but is interpreted as a metaphor for a broader cultural dilution—a loss of traditional knowledge and respect. Thus, mastery of the tonal system becomes the paramount measure of cultural competence, functioning as an ideological boundary marker that regulates belonging and reinforces generational authority. This moves the analysis far beyond Smith's (1967) phonological description into the realm of social symbolism.

Ganmaganzhi (Proverbs) and the Metapragmatics of Cultural Authority

We find that proverbs function as a primary metapragmatic device. Their use is a skilled practice that entextualises (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) present situations within a framework of traditional morality, framing the speaker's perspective as culturally sanctioned. This practice reinforces an ideology that venerates Nupe's most archaic registers as the legitimate vehicle for cultural reasoning, thereby validating traditional worldviews and hierarchies. This analysis provides a dynamic, practice-oriented understanding of how cultural authority is linguistically enacted and maintained, particularly through the strategic deployment of traditional discourse forms in modern contexts.

Language Contact as Strategic Ideological Negotiation

Analysing contact phenomena as ideological struggle yields a detailed perspective. Stratified Borrowing reflects a community-level ideological agreement: English is permitted to dominate modern technological domains, but Nupe's core grammatical structure is symbolically guarded. Code-switching is revealed not as a deficit but as a strategic, skilled practice (Auer, 1984) of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981), allowing speakers to navigate between the cultural capital of tradition and the economic capital of modernity within a single speech event. This reframes language contact from a threat to a complex site of agentive negotiation, where speakers consciously manage their linguistic resources to address different aspects of their identity and social positioning.

Case Study: The Orthographic Dilemma—Nupe in Digital Spaces

The digital realm provides a potent case study of ideological tension and adaptation. The primary challenge for written Nupe in digital spaces is the effective representation of tone. Standardised orthography using diacritics (à, á, ā) is poorly supported on default mobile keyboards and social media platforms, leading most users to write without them. This practical decision results in what

Irvine and Gal (2000) would term the erasure of a phonemic distinction, creating ambiguity where unmarked *ba* could represent *bá* (to be sour), *bà* (to cut), *bà* (like), or *bā* (to count).

In response, Nupe social media users have developed creative orthographic strategies. Some employ vowel doubling to indicate high tone (e.g., writing *baa* for *bá*), while others have introduced the use of 'n' to represent nasality markers. More significantly, a common practice is metalinguistic glossing within the text itself. Users often insert clarifications in parentheses—for instance, writing: "*We e ba mi*" (*bà* - to like) (meaning "I like you"). This represents a remarkable adaptation: embedding explicit metalinguistic commentary directly into messages to teach readers how to interpret unmarked text.

Digital communication also intensifies code-switching patterns. While Nigerian Pidgin English dominates broader Nigerian forums, dedicated Nupe-language WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages (e.g., "Edo Zhà Nupe" - Genuine Nupe News) have created digital ethnolinguistic domains (Androutsopoulos, 2006) where Nupe use is explicitly enforced and celebrated. Within these spaces, switching to English for technical terms remains ubiquitous and efficient. This digital case study demonstrates that the threat of technological erasure simultaneously acts as a catalyst for innovation, revealing the language's vitality through community-driven adaptation to new communicative realities.

Conclusion

This study has made its original contribution by demonstrating that the Nupe language is more than a system of rules; it is a dynamic semiotic resource for negotiating identity. We have provided a new model for understanding Nupe by applying ideological and ecological frameworks to show how structure is made socially significant. Our analysis has revealed how tonal features are iconized as markers of authenticity, how proverbs serve as tools of cultural authority, and how language contact represents strategic negotiation rather than mere borrowing.

The implications are twofold. For language policy, our findings highlight the inadequacy of top-down support and emphasise the need to engage with grassroots ideologies. For sociolinguistic theory, we contribute a powerful, holistic case study that challenges deficit models of endangerment by highlighting speaker agency, creativity, and strategic competence.

Ultimately, we conclude that Nupe stands at a critical ideological crossroads. The pervasive valorisation of a "deep," tonal Nupe risks erasing (Irvine & Gal, 2000) the very adaptive practices that constitute its contemporary vitality. The path forward requires an ideological shift—one that recognises the functional value of all registers. Therefore, the originality of this work lies in its central claim: the future of a language is not pre-determined but is forged in the everyday metalinguistic debates and pragmatic choices of its speakers. This theoretical reorientation, exemplified through the Nupe case, is our primary contribution to the field, offering a framework for understanding language vitality that prioritises agency over inevitability in contexts of rapid social change.

References

- Adegbija, E. (1994). *Language attitudes in Sub-Saharan Africa: A sociolinguistic overview*. Multilingual Matters.
- Androutsopoulos, J. (2006). Introduction: Sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(4), 419–438.
- Auer, P. (1984). *Bilingual conversation*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Banfield, A. W. (1914). *Dictionary of the Nupe language* (Vol. 1). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Bauman, R., & Briggs, C. L. (1990). Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19, 59–88.
- Blench, R. (2013). *The Nupoid languages of west-central Nigeria: Overview and comparative wordlist*. Kay Williamson Educational Foundation.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Gal, S. (1978). Peasant men can't get wives: Language change and sex roles in a bilingual community. *Language in Society*, 7(1), 1–16.
- Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Haugen, E. (1972). *The ecology of language*. Stanford University Press.
- Irvine, J. T., & Gal, S. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In P. V. Kroskrity (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities* (pp. 35–83). School of American Research Press.
- Kroskrity, P. V. (2000). Regimenting languages: Language ideological perspectives. In P. V. Kroskrity (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities* (pp. 1–34). School of American Research Press.
- Mufwene, S. S. (2001). *The ecology of language evolution*. Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, M. (1979). Language structure and linguistic ideology. In P. R. Clyne, W. F. Hanks, & C. L. Hofbauer (Eds.), *The elements: A parasection on linguistic units and levels* (pp. 193–247). Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Smith, N. V. (1967). The phonology of Nupe. *Journal of African Languages*, 6(2), 153–169.
- Woolard, K. A. (1998). Introduction: Language ideology as a field of inquiry. In B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard, & P. V. Kroskrity (Eds.), *Language ideologies: Practice and theory* (pp. 3–47). Oxford University Press.