# A Tri-Generational Study of Language Choice & Shift in Port Harcourt

**KELECHUKWU IHEMERE**

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*A Tri-Generational Study*
*of Language Choice & Shift in Port Harcourt*

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*In Evergreen Memory of My Dear Mama*
*Edith Ugochi Ihemere*

# Contents

*Preface* xv
*Acknowledgments* xviii
**Chapter 1: Introduction** 1
**1. 1 Nigeria: Historical/Political Background** 2
**1. 2 Nigeria: Linguistic Context** 6
**1. 3 The Question of Choice in Nigeria** 10
**1. 4 Scope of Study** 16
**1. 5 Conclusion** 19
**Notes** 20

**Chapter 2: The Ikwerre – Origins and Social Organisation** 21
**2. 0 Introduction** 21
**2. 1 Origins and Migrations** 24
2. 1. 1 The Benin Origin 24
2. 1. 2 The Igbo Origin 26
2. 1. 3 The Linguistic Evidence in Support of the Igbo Tradition 28
**2. 2 The Social Structure and Organisation of Ikwerreland** 35
2. 2. 1 The Outline Geography of Ikwerreland 36
2. 2. 2 Ikwerre Social Structure and Organisation 39
2. 2. 3 The Family 42
2. 2. 4 Socialisation 47
**2. 3 The Ikwerre of Port Harcourt** 49
2. 3. 1 Demography and Economy 50
2. 3. 2 The Linguistic Context 53
**2. 4 The History and Evolution of NPE** 55
2. 4. 1 NPE and its Speakers 55
2. 4. 2 Pidgin or Creole? 56
2. 4. 3 Genesis and Evolution of NPE 57
**2. 5 Conclusion** 60

**Notes** 61

**Chapter 3: The Study of Bilingualism and Language Choice** 62
**3. 0 Introduction** 63
**3. 1 Classical Perspectives of Multilingualism** 67
3. 1. 1 Diglossia 68
3. 1. 2 Domain Analysis 75
**3. 2 Language Conflict** 81
**3. 3 Diglossia, Domain Analysis and Language Conflict: Similarities and Differences** 85
**3. 4 The Interactional Approach** 85
3. 4. 1 Conversational Code-Switching 86
3. 4. 2 Markedness Model 89
3. 4. 3 Sequential Analysis Model 93
**3. 5 Social Network Model** 99
3. 5. 1 Doing Social Network Analysis 106
3. 5. 2 Social Network Analysis and Communities of Practice 114
**3. 6 Language Attitudes** 119
3. 6. 1 Methods of Language Attitudes Research 120
3. 6. 2 Matched Guise Technique: Problems and Remedies 124
**3. 7 Conclusion** 125
**Notes** 127

**Chapter 4: Data Collection: Methodology and Ethics** 129
**4. 0 Introduction** 129
**4. 1 Informants** 130
4. 1. 1 Age and Sex as Sociolinguistic Variables 134
**4. 2 Participant Observation** 137
4. 2. 1 Doing Participant Observation: Advantages and Disadvantages 139

**4. 3 Doing fieldwork** 148
4. 3. 1 Statistical Analysis 150
**4. 4 Language Attitudes Tests** 155
**4. 5 Gathering Social Network Data** 159
**4. 6 Tape Recordings** 165
4. 6. 1 Analysis of the Tape Recorded Data 168
**4. 7 Gaining Access** 173
4. 7. 1 Field Relationships 177
4. 7. 2 Field relationships and Linguistic Competence of the Fieldworker 179
4. 7. 3 Minimising the Observer Effect 181
**4. 8 Ethics** 181
**4. 9 Conclusion** 184
**Notes** 185

**Chapter 5: Patterns of Language Choice and Language Attitudes Analysis** 186
**5. 0 Introduction** 186
**5. 1 Interview versus Participant Observation Data** 189
**5. 2 Language Choices by Three Generations** 192
5. 2. 1 Parents' Generation 192
5. 2. 2 Grandparents' Generation 195
5. 2. 3 Younger Generation 197
**5. 3 Language Choice and Speaker Variables** 202
5. 3. 1 Age of Speaker 204
5. 3. 2 Sex of Speaker 206
5. 3. 3 The Effect of Age and Sex on Language Choice 208
5. 3. 4 Level of Education Attained 209
**5. 4 Language Attitudes Analysis** 214
5. 4. 1 Language Proficiency 216
5. 4. 1. 1 Correlations Between Age and Language Proficiency Scores 216
5. 4. 1. 2 Correlations Between Sex and Language Proficiency Scores 216
5. 4. 1. 3 Correlations Between Level of

Education and Proficiency Scores 217
5. 4. 2 Language Preference 218
5. 4. 2. 1 Correlations Between Age and Language Preference Scores 218
5. 4. 2. 2 Correlations Between Level of Education and Language Preference Scores 218
5. 4. 3 Correlations Between Language Proficiency and Observed Language Choice Patterns 219
5. 4. 4 Matched Guise Experiments 221
**5. 5 Conclusion** 226
**Notes** 229

**Chapter 6: Impact of Social Network Ties on Language Choice** 230
**6. 0 Introduction** 230
**6. 1 Contrasts in Social Network Patterns by Generations** 232
6. 1. 1 Exchange Networks 232
6. 1. 2 Interactive Networks 236
6. 1. 3 Relationship Between Speaker Age and Network Scores 239
6. 1. 4 Relationship Between Exchange and Interactive Networks 241
**6. 2 Effects of Social Networks on Language Choice Patterns** 242
6. 2. 1 Relationship Between Exchange Networks and Language Choice Patterns 243
6. 2. 2 Relationship Between Interactive Networks and Language Choice Patterns 246
**6. 3 Relationships Between Network Types and Language Proficiency** 250
6. 3. 1 Relationship Between Exchange Networks and Language Proficiency 250

6. 3. 2 Relationship Between Interactive Networks and Language Proficiency 252
**6. 4 Exchange and Interactive Networks: A Synthesis** 254
**6. 5 Relationships Between Differences on the Social and Stylistic Levels of Language Choice** 258
**6. 6 Conclusion** 262
**Notes** 265

**Chapter 7: Ikwerre/Nigerian Pidgin English Conversational Code-Switching** 266
**7. 0 Introduction** 266
**7. 1 Code-Switching: Framework** 267
7. 1. 1 Types of Code-Switching 270
**7. 2 Conversational Code-Switching in Port Harcourt** 274
7. 2. 1 Turn-Taking 274
7. 2. 2 Adjacency Pairs 284
7. 2. 3 Preference 292
7. 2. 4 Overlapping Talk 298
7. 2. 5 Repair 301
7. 2. 6 Other Functions of Code-Switching 307
**7. 3 Conclusion** 313
**Notes** 315

**Chapter 8: Conclusion and Implications** 316
**8. 1 Summary and Findings** 316
**8. 2 A Typology of Bilingualism** 323
**8. 3 Implications of the Findings for the Ikwerre Community of Port Harcourt** 327
**Appendix I. Interview Schedule** 330
**Appendix II. Implicational Scales** 335
**Appendix III. Language Attitudes Scores** 337
**Appendix IV. Social Network Scores** 342
**Appendix V. Transcription Symbols for Verbal and Non-Verbal Behaviour** 346

**Appendix VI. Sample Text Used in the Matched Guise Experiments** 349
**Bibliography** 353
**Glossary of Foreign Words** 419
**Index** 424

# Tables

**Chapter Two**
**Table 1** Informants occupation 52
**Chapter Three**
**Table 1** The relationship between bilingualism and diglossia 72
**Table 2** Linguistic variables correlating with network scores for all subjects 103
**Table 3** Observed language choice patterns by male speakers 109
**Table 4** Observed language choice patterns by female speakers 110
**Chapter Four**
**Table 1** Composition of each family 131
**Table 2** Generation cohort 132
**Table 3** Distribution of speaker age 132
**Table 4** The matched guise rating scale 156
**Chapter Five**
**Table 1** Language choice by ten fathers (observation) 193
**Table 2** Language choice by ten mothers (observation) 193
**Table 3** Language choice by five grandfathers (observation) 195
**Table 4** Language choice by five grandmothers (observation) 196
**Table 5** Language choice by twenty-three male children (observation) 198
**Table 6** Language choice by twenty-three female children (observation) 200
**Table 7** Generalised patterns of language choice

with family members 202
**Table 8** Generalised patterns of language choice with non-family members 203
**Table 9** Mean age of speakers of different language choice patterns 204
**Table 10** Distribution of male and female speakers of different language choice patterns 206
**Table 11** Mean age of male and female speakers of different language choice patterns 209
**Table 12** Average level of education attained by male and female speakers 212
**Table 13** Correlations between language choice patterns and language proficiency 220
**Table 14** Contrasts between Ikwerre and NPE guises (Younger speakers) 221
**Table 15** Contrasts between Ikwerre and NPE guises (Parents) 222
**Table 16** Contrasts between Ikwerre and NPE guises (Grandparents) 222

**Chapter Six**

**Table 1** Average number of 'Indigenous' ties in exchange networks by generation and sex 233
**Table 2** Average number of 'generational' ties in exchange networks by generation and sex 235
**Table 3** Average number of 'Indigenous' ties in interactive networks by generation and sex 237
**Table 4** Average number of 'generational' ties in interactive networks by generation and sex 238
**Table 5** Relationships between network scores and speaker age 240
**Table 6** Relationships between exchange and interactive networks 241
**Table 7** Mean scores of speakers with four language choice patterns with family members on the indigenous index of

exchange networks 243
**Table 8** Mean scores of speakers with seven language choice patterns with non-family members on the indigenous index of exchange networks 244
**Table 9** Mean scores of speakers with four language choice patterns with family members on the generational index of exchange networks 245
**Table 10** Mean scores of speakers with seven language choice patterns with non-family members on the generation index of exchange networks 245
**Table 11** Mean scores of speakers with four language choice patterns with family members on the indigenous index of interactive networks 246
**Table 12** Mean scores of speakers with seven language choice patterns with non-family members on the indigenous index of interactive networks 247
**Table 13** Mean scores of speakers with four language choice patterns with family members on the generational index of interactive networks 248
**Table 14** Mean scores of speakers with seven language choice patterns with non-family members on the generational index of interactive networks 248
**Table 15** Correlations between language proficiency scores and indigenous index of exchange networks 251
**Table 16** Correlations between language proficiency scores and generational index of exchange networks 251
**Table 17** Correlations between language proficiency scores and indigenous index

of interactive networks 252
**Table 18** Correlations between language proficiency scores and generational index of interactive networks 253
**Appendix II**
**Table 1** Interview data – Language choice patterns by male speakers 335
**Table 2** Interview data – Language choice patterns by female speakers 336
**Appendix III**
**Table 3** Language proficiency and preference scores (Male speakers) 337
**Table 4** Language proficiency and preference scores (Female speakers) 338
**Table 5** Matched guise test aggregate scores in percentage – Ikwerre language (Group III: Grandparents – Male and Female) 339
**Table 6** Matched guise test aggregate scores in percentage – Ikwerre language (Group II: Parents – Male and Female) 339
**Table 7** Matched guise test aggregate scores in percentage – Ikwerre language (Group I: Younger speakers – Male and Female) 340
**Table 8** Matched guise test aggregate scores in percentage – Pidgin (Group III: Grandparents – Male and Female) 340
**Table 9** Matched guise test aggregate scores in percentage – Pidgin (Group II: Parents – Male and Female) 341
**Table 10** Matched guise test aggregate scores in percentage – Pidgin (Group I: Younger speakers – Male and Female) 341
**Appendix IV**
**Table 11** Exchange networks (Male speakers) 342
**Table 12** Exchange networks (Female speakers) 343
**Table 13** Interactive networks (Male speakers) 344
**Table 14** Interactive networks (Female speakers) 345

**Appendix V**

**Table 15** Transcription symbols used in this study 346

# Figures

**Chapter One**

**Figure 1** Map showing the thirty-six States of Nigeria 3

**Figure 2** African language families and some major African languages 7

**Chapter Two**

**Figure 1** Map of Ikwerreland 21

**Figure 2** Literacy rates – 15 years and older 53

**Chapter Four**

**Figure 1** Language attitudes questionnaire 158

**Chapter Five**

**Figure 1** Histogram (Family) 204

**Figure 2** Histogram (Non-family) 205

**Figure 3** Patterns (Family) 207

**Figure 4** Patterns (Non-family) 207

**Chapter Six**

**Figure 1** Indigenous ties in exchange networks 233

**Figure 2** Generational ties in exchange networks 236

**Figure 3** Indigenous ties in interactive networks 237

**Figure 4** Generational ties in interactive networks 239

# Preface

This book is intended as a textbook for advanced undergraduate or graduate students in the field of bilingualism and language choice. It is almost indisputable that a good deal of research has by now been undertaken in the field of bilingualism and language choice. To mention just a few of these studies that have contributed richly to the field: Amuda (1986) - Yoruba/English code-switching in Nigeria; Auer (1984a) - code-switching among the children of Italian migrant workers in Constance, Germany; Bani-Shoraka (2005) - language choice and code-switching in the Azerbaijani community in Tehran; Blom & Gumperz (1972) - code-switching in Norway; Bortoni-Ricardo (1985) - dialectal adjustment of rural migrants to Brazlandia, a satellite city of Brasilia; Dattamajumdar (2005) - language attitude of the Oriya migrant population in Kolkata; Gal (1979) - language choice and shift in bilingual Oberwart, Austria; Hohenthal (1999) - language use of educated Indians; Li Wei (1994) - language choice patterns of Chinese immigrants in Newcastle upon Tyne, England; Sebba (1993) - language use of London Jamaicans. These studies and numerous other works that due to space and time constraints could not be mentioned here have broadened our understanding of the concept of bilingualism and its consequences. They have also enhanced our knowledge about the organisation of bilingual conversation by investigating in detail the structures of code alternation in different speech communities.

However, the fact still remains that little or no systematic sociolinguistic exploration has been undertaken on the linguistic behaviours of the speakers of minority languages in Nigeria. According to Crystal (1997), Grimes

(2000) and Heine & Nurse (2000) there are about 6, 000 languages spoken in the world today. A third of these languages are spoken in Africa, with Nigeria contributing well over 400 languages (Batibo, 2005; Webb & Sure, 2000). Only 3 languages (i.e. Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) are major languages together with Nigerian Standard English (NSE) and Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). This means that there are well over 395 minority languages spoken in Nigeria, one of which is the *Ikwerre* language spoken by the minority Ikwerre ethnic group. The location of the Ikwerre people in Nigeria and socio-economic/political factors have meant that members of this community are marginalised and the use of their language restricted to very limited domains.

Thus, in this book I present a systematic and coherent synchronic account of the language choice patterns by Ikwerre-NPE bilinguals in Port Harcourt City, Nigeria. The Ikwerre people are a little known minority ethnic group whose social history and current linguistic behaviours have before now not been systematically explored. This book is organised in eight chapters: Chapter 1, the introductory chapter presents a brief account of the historical/political and global view of the linguistic situation in Nigeria. Although, the primary focus is on Nigeria, it will also draw on examples from other countries in Europe, North America and Asia. The aim of such a discussion is to allow the reader to appreciate the difficulties faced by individuals living in multilingual societies and the need to undertake detailed and quite specific case studies of the language choices that these speakers grapple with in their day-to-day interactions. Chapter 2 discusses relevant aspects of the Ikwerre culture and social structure/organisation - past and present. In this chapter, the rationale for selecting the Ikwerre community of Port Harcourt as my object of study is outlined. Here, I also give an overview of the history and evolution of NPE and why it has become an important medium in the Port Harcourt

Ikwerre linguistic repertoire. Chapter 3 summarises the work which has been done to date in the field of bilingualism and language choice which has a bearing on my own research. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of the methodologies employed in this study and also examines some broader issues of the ethical questions raised by research of this kind. Chapter 5 is concerned with the descriptions of the observed language choice patterns of the Ikwerre of Port Harcourt and their attitudes towards Ikwerre and NPE. Chapter 6 gives an analysis of the social network ties of the respondents and their impact on language choice strategies. Chapter 7 discusses instances of conversational code-switching in Port Harcourt and their implications as regards how members of this community deploy this device to manipulate, influence and define the situation as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention. In Chapter 8, I provide a summary of the main findings and discuss their implications for future research in bilingualism and related disciplines.

Finally, it is my hope that in the course of reading this book the reader can come to a place where their understanding and appreciation of the effects of languages in contact in non-Western communities is enriched with the illustrative material in this book.

KUI

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This endeavour could not have been accomplished without the help and cooperation of the seventy-six men, women, boys and girls, who allowed me to intrude into their lives – at meal times and family-hour; at play-times; sometimes accompanying them to work and school, and even to sit in their market stalls to see that everything I needed to realise this project was obtained. It has also been a privilege to have received guidance, support and assistance throughout the development and production of this book from Karen Corrigan.

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# Chapter One
## Introduction

This book is concerned with presenting a systematic and coherent account of the language choice patterns of the Ikwerre people of Port Harcourt City, Nigeria, who are faced with the choice between the Ikwerre language and Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). It also focuses on how we might incorporate matched guise experiments within a study of language choice and shift, so as to provide insights into how local contemporary attitudes towards language(s) might ultimately influence code choice.

It is a well-established fact that human communication involves selecting from the linguistic and stylistic repertoire available, that is, in the process of communicating we are constantly favouring some styles/norms and rejecting others (see Hoffmann, 1991; Spolsky, 1998). This choice can be conscious or unconscious. For monolinguals, their choice will be according to the existing conventions of the members of their speech community and their own idiosyncratic preferences. The members of bilingual/multilingual societies are faced with even wider choices in their language use. Thus, I concur with Fasold (1984) that not only do people use language to share their thoughts and feelings with other people, they exploit the subtle and not so subtle aspects of language to reveal and define their social relationships with the people they are talking to, with people who can overhear them, and even with people who are nowhere around. That is, language is an essential tool in the institution, execution and sustenance of human communicative interaction.

Given this knowledge, a study of language choice affects not only those who are directly involved in the everyday practice of making choices or those who have to face it in their professions – e.g. teachers, and journalists but also those in government whose language policy decisions are bound to transform people's lives in a significant way.

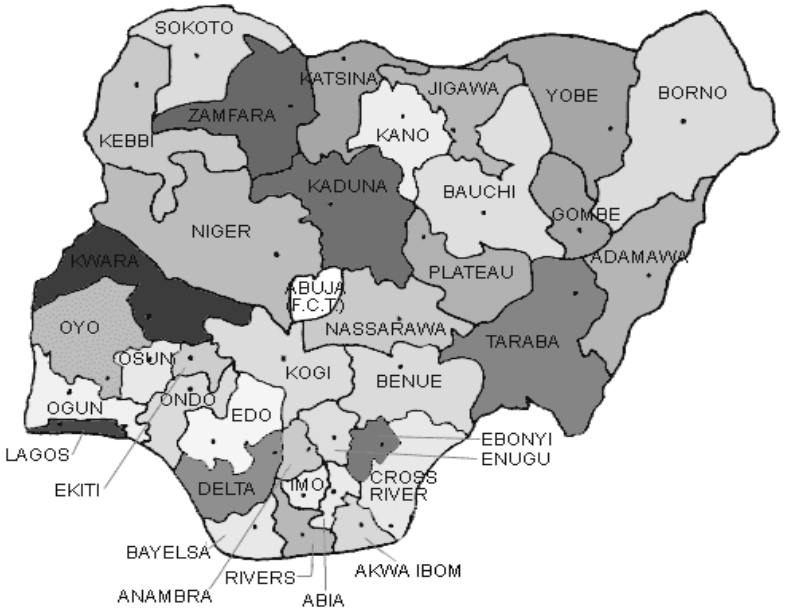
In many countries of the world, language choice can be accomplished simply by choosing one or another of the two or more languages a speaker knows. A large number of countries are so linguistically diverse that it is not extraordinary to find that children in these polities are bilingual or multilingual. In fact, Fasold (1984: 1) points out that many countries in Africa and Asia have literally hundreds of languages within their borders. It is not the case that these countries have one language that almost everyone speaks, with the rest belonging to small isolated tribes. Further, he states that of course there are small-group languages, but there are others spoken by substantial populations. For example, there are 18 officially spoken recognised languages in India today. The Philippines has 6 major regional languages and Nigeria has well over 400 languages (see Batibo, 2005; Fasold, 1984). Despite the degree of diversity that exists globally and which might lead one to expect heterogeneity locally in Nigeria, only three major regional languages are recognised in the 1989 Nigerian constitution. This state of affairs warrants deeper investigation and it will be the focus of this book.

## 1. 1 Nigeria: Historical/political background

Nigeria is blessed with fertile land and is rich in natural resources such as petroleum and iron ore. Its coastline measures about 853 kilometres, and covers a total area of 923,768 square kilometres.

Nigeria has a teeming population of about 131,859,731 people distributed in the 36 States that make up the Nigeria nation as shown in Figure 1.[i]

**Figure 1** Map showing the thirty-six States of Nigeria




In the 15th century Nigeria had contact with Portuguese slave traders and later Christian missionaries from the United Kingdom, who set-up schools and were responsible for establishing Christianity as one of the recognised religions. By 1865 British influence over Nigeria had spread, leading to its annexation and colonisation.

The impact of slavery on Nigeria and its peoples is well documented and will not be dwelt upon in this book (see for instance, Lovejoy, 2000; Manning, 1995; Searing, 2003).

Here, the focus is on the linguistic implications of this contact. It does have to be said, though, that the British colonial policy of the period was to pillage and exploit the human and material resources available in the country for their own ends; hence they did not have any future oriented plans that were geared towards the political and economic emancipation of Nigerians (see also Ajayi, 2004; Bamgbose, 1991, 2000; Batibo, 2005; Faraclas, 1996). The schools that the Christian missionaries founded, which were taken-over by the colonisers, mainly churned out mediocre translators/interpreters and medium level manpower to help the British perpetuate their political and economic hegemony over the country (Bamgbose, 1991). Colonial rule lasted well into the latter part of the nineteenth century, until a number of the more well-educated Nigerian elite harnessed public opinion and began to agitate for the right to self-determination and governance for the Nigerian people. Unlike what was to happen later in South Africa, where the black South Africans took-up arms to fight a protracted guerrilla war against the apartheid regime before gaining independence, Nigeria gained her independence from the British regime through peaceful dialogue. This culminated in a meeting that took place at midnight on October 1st 1960 which ended almost a century of colonial rule. Soon after independence, Nigeria was to witness the rise of intense ethnic rivalry and jealousy among the major ethnic groups, all clamouring for political and economic dominance of the country. This meant that the minority ethnic groups were left out, as it were, in the scheme of things in the country.

The wrangling escalated into an unsuccessful bloody civil war by the Biafrans, who wanted to secede from the rest of Nigeria to found their own nation. The war lasted three years (1967 to 1970).[ii]

This ethnic bickering and rancour was the reason the Nigerian military gave for intervening in Nigerian politics. This intervention plunged the country into a prolonged period of serious economic hardship and engendered a political quagmire. Following nearly 16 years of military rule, a new constitution was adopted in 1999, and a peaceful transition to civilian government was completed. The current President faces the daunting task of institutionalizing democracy and rebuilding a petroleum-based economy, whose revenues have been squandered through corruption and mismanagement. In addition, the administration must defuse long-standing ethnic and religious tensions, if it is to build a sound foundation for economic growth and political stability.

Despite some irregularities, the April 2003 elections marked the first civilian transfer of power in Nigeria's history. The greatest task faced by the leaders of Nigeria at independence in 1960 was that of forging national unity and integration in a country where there are over 400 languages and a myriad of dialects. In trying to bring the nation together the leaders of the day sought political stability in language: but, what language? English was already established as the national and official language, being the language of the former colonialists and also the language of wider communication (LWC). The level of ethnic tension in the country at that time meant that none of the indigenous languages could have been adopted or elevated to the status of a national language, although this would have marked a complete break with the past (colonialism) and bestowed a new identity on the emerging nation.

Anyway, the leaders were equally concerned with keeping the nation connected to the international community at the level of diplomacy, international politics and world trade. I expatiate on the issue of language further in the next two sections.[iii]

**1. 2 Nigeria: Linguistic context**

The continent of Africa has been described by Grenoble & Whaley (1998: 42) as linguistically 'distinct', due to its highly complex language situation. Apart from the multitude and high concentration of languages, the patterns of language choice and use are remarkably intricate, as most people are multilingual. That is, most Africans speak more than one language and choose the language or variety of language they use according to the context/and or interlocutor. Nigerians are no exception to this pan-African phenomenon despite the official three language position referred to above. Mkude (2001: 160) postulates that the sociolinguistic profile of Africa can be studied either horizontally or vertically.

From a horizontal perspective the sociolinguistic profile of Africa involves doing a 'user' analysis, which is finding out who speaks which language in order to determine the distinct language communities. Adopting this approach would call for the consideration of the 'plurilingual' nature of the African continent. However, from a vertical point of view, the sociolinguistic profile of Africa entails doing a 'use' analysis. By employing this technique we are looking at the set of languages that members of a speech community have at their disposal, and therefore use at their discretion according to the subject matter, the personal relationships with their interlocutors, the context, the mode of communication and other circumstances and needs.