

The Nature and Function of Code-Switching Amongst Students of Higher Institutions in Adamawa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the nature and function of code-switching among students in higher institutions of learning in Adamawa State, Nigeria, a linguistically diverse region where English, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages interact in daily communication. Guided by two research questions concerning the predominant structural patterns of code-switching and the primary communicative and social functions it serves, and how both vary according to participants' linguistic backgrounds, the study is anchored in Poplack's (1980) structural typology and Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistic framework. It adopts a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, combining qualitative data from interviews with 60 students and 30 lecturers, focus group discussions, and classroom observations with quantitative data from a Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 600 students across six higher institutions representing Adamawa State's three geopolitical zones. Analysis of 1,247 recorded code-switching instances shows that intra-sentential switching is the most frequent structural type (49.1%), followed by inter-sentential switching (39.9%) and tag-switching (11.0%), with English-Hausa alternation predominating and nouns and verbs constituting the most frequently switched syntactic categories. Functionally, code-switching serves seven identifiable purposes, most prominently pedagogical scaffolding, social solidarity, and affective expression, indicating that students deploy it as a deliberate communicative strategy rather than a marker of linguistic deficiency. These findings extend structural and functional models of code-switching to the underexplored north-eastern Nigerian context.

Keywords: *Code-switching, Multilingualism, Adamawa State, Nigerian Pidgin, Sociolinguistics*

1. Introduction

Nigeria's linguistic landscape presents one of the most complex multilingual configurations in the world, with over 500 indigenous languages alongside English as the colonial legacy and official language of education, administration, and commerce (Romaine, 1995). Code-switching the alternation between two or more languages or varieties within a single discourse event is within this environment a social necessity rather than a merely linguistic phenomenon (Muysken, 2000; Myers-Scotton, 1993). This study examines the nature and function of code-switching in higher institutions of learning in Adamawa State, a region home to indigenous languages such as Bachama, Chamba, Fulfulde, Higi, Kilba, Marghi, and Mbula, alongside Hausa as a regional lingua franca and English as the official medium of instruction, drawing on Poplack's (1980) tripartite typology and Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistic framework. Despite this profound multilingualism, higher institutions continue to enforce English-centric language policies that marginalise indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin, and while code-switching persists across lecture halls, tutorials, and peer interactions, its structural nature and communicative functions remain poorly documented, with existing Nigerian scholarship concentrated on secondary school contexts (Jegede, 2012; Modupeola, 2013) or teacher-initiated switching (Aliyu et al., 2020; Abdullahi, 2023), leaving Adamawa State's distinct sociolinguistic configuration unsystematically investigated. The central aim of this study is to investigate and document the nature and function of code-switching among students of higher institutions in Adamawa State, with specific objectives to examine its structural nature and to determine its predominant social and communicative functions and how these vary by participants' linguistic background. Two research questions guide the investigation: first, what are the predominant structural patterns of code-switching among students and how do these vary across languages; and second, what are the primary communicative and social functions served by code-switching and how do these differ according to participants' linguistic backgrounds. The study advances sociolinguistic theory by contextualising code-switching within Nigeria's postcolonial multilingual educational setting, an area under-theorised relative to Western and Asian contexts (Poplack, 1980; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Canagarajah, 1995), while countering the stigmatisation of indigenous languages by validating students' multilingual repertoires as cognitive and cultural assets. It is delimited to six higher institutions in Adamawa State two federal universities, two state-owned polytechnics, and two colleges of education representing the state's three geopolitical zones, focusing on undergraduate students during the 2024/2025 academic session and on naturalistic conversational data covering English, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages, with primary emphasis on student-initiated code-switching.

2. Literature Review

Code-switching has been defined as the linguistic ability of an individual or group to use more than one language, variety, or style within an utterance or conversation (Romaine, 1995), and as a natural and cognitively efficient way for bilingual or multilingual speakers to produce language (Milroy & Gordon, 2003), a phenomenon Bhatia and Ritchie (2012) situate within the broader study of bilingualism and multilingualism. In the Nigerian context, three languages are of particular relevance: Nigerian Pidgin English functions as a contact language and lingua franca shaped by English as a superstrate and languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa as substrates, with origins traced to early contact between Portuguese traders and coastal communities in Calabar

and no standardised grammar (Mensah, 2011; Ugot, 2009; Ugot & Ogundipe, 2011); Hausa, a Chadic language of the Afro-Asiatic family, is the most widely spoken language in Nigeria and a regional lingua franca across much of the north (Newman, 2000; Jagger, 2001); and English retains its position as official language of government, education, and commerce, a colonial legacy structuring national language policy (Bamgbose, 1991).

The study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks. Poplack's (1980) structural typology distinguishes intra-sentential switching, which requires a high degree of grammatical competence in both languages, from inter-sentential switching, which requires less grammatical integration, and tag-switching, the insertion of a tag or formulaic expression from one language into an utterance otherwise in another. Muysken (2000) offers a complementary approach comprising insertional switching, alternational switching, and congruent lexicalization. Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistic framework supplies the functional lens, identifying quotation, addressee specification, reiteration, message qualification, personalization versus objectification, and interjection as recurring functions, while more recent scholarship has reframed code-switching within translanguaging theory, conceptualising multilingual speakers as drawing fluidly on an integrated repertoire rather than alternating between bounded systems (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022; Garcia & Leiva, 2014), with pedagogical translanguaging in particular involving the purposeful use of multilingual resources to support meaning-making (He et al., 2024; Abdulatief & Guzula, 2024). Structural research on code-switching has evolved substantially since Pfaff's (1976) study of Spanish-English bilinguals, which identified grammatical constraints on switching at the clause level. In the Nigerian context, Abdullahi (2023) found that teachers' code-switching in Kano tertiary institutions served both instructional functions (clarification, evaluation, translation) and social functions (emotion, humor, discipline), categorizable within Poplack's tripartite typology, while Atas and Sagin-Simsek (2021) similarly documented discourse and educational functions of code-switching among students and teachers in Turkish EFL classrooms. Rasdi (2016) identified insertional and alternational patterns among Malaysian Facebook users, with nouns forming the largest switched category (49.4%), a pattern this study's findings closely mirror. Functionally, Nur and Marlyna (2014) identified quotation, addressee specification, reiteration, message qualification, and emotion expression among Malay-English bilinguals on Facebook. In Nigerian classrooms, Nkopuruk et al. (2026) applied Conversation Analysis to demonstrate that code-switching functions as an interactional resource for clarification, repair, and classroom management, directly challenging deficit views of the practice, while Alsalem and Elsaywy (2025) similarly found that university EFL teachers used code-switching to scaffold vocabulary and explain complex content. Canagarajah (1995) and Cook (2001) frame code-switching as a legitimate socializing and learning strategy rather than a sign of incomplete language acquisition, and Jegede (2012) and Modupeola (2013) documented its pedagogical value in Nigerian primary and secondary classrooms. Shehu and Yau (2024) found that natural bilinguals in Katsina State colleges of education code-switched more than consecutive bilinguals, who leaned toward code-mixing, while Eneremadu et al. (2024) situate such patterns within the broader tension between English dominance and indigenous language preservation in Nigerian language planning. Gender has also emerged as a recurring variable: Tsokalidou's (1994) finding that young Greek-Australian women code-switched more frequently (62%) than young men (38%), often for accommodation and solidarity purposes, is echoed in the Nigerian context by Aliyu et al. (2020), who found that both geography and gender significantly influenced Hausa-English code-switching motivations among students in a Katsina State college of education.

Three gaps motivate this study. Geographically, most Nigerian code-switching research has focused on southwestern and northwestern Nigeria, with northeastern Nigeria including Adamawa State remaining largely unexamined. Institutionally, existing scholarship has concentrated on primary and secondary education, leaving the distinct multilingual configuration of tertiary institutions under-explored. Theoretically, while Poplack's typology and Gumperz's functional framework are both widely cited, few studies have applied them in combination to Nigerian higher-education data, and fewer still connect such findings to concrete language-policy recommendations. This study addresses these gaps through its focus on Adamawa State, its mixed-methods design, and its integration of structural and functional analysis.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), conducted across six higher institutions in Adamawa State; Modibbo Adama University Yola, Adamawa State Polytechnic Yola, Federal Polytechnic Mubi, Adamawa State University Mubi, College of Agriculture Ganye and Adamawa State Polytechnic Numan selected to represent the state's three geopolitical zones. A stratified random sample of 600 undergraduate students completed a Likert-scale questionnaire, while 60 students and 30 lecturers were purposively sampled for interviews, alongside six focus group discussions and systematic observation of 24 classes, with naturalistic audio/video recordings (approximately 80 hours) transcribed using modified Jeffersonian conventions (Jefferson, 2004). Qualitative data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach and Conversation Analysis (Nkopuruk et al., 2026), applying Poplack's (1980) typology and Gumperz's (1982) functional framework, while quantitative data were analysed in SPSS version 28 using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, t-tests, ANOVA, correlation, and regression, with findings integrated through a convergent parallel design; validity was strengthened through inter-rater agreement checks and faculty review of questionnaire items, and the study adhered to standard ethical protocols including informed consent, anonymity, and institutional ethical clearance, with limitations including observer's paradox, self-report bias, and single-session data collection.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The quantitative survey involved 600 students (300 males, 300 females) aged 17–28 years ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 2.1$) across six institutions. Linguistic backgrounds were diverse: 34% identified Hausa as their first language, 26% Fulfulde, 15% Higi, 12% Marghi, 8% Bachama, and 5% other languages. Self-rated proficiency was high in English ($M = 3.8/5$), moderate-high in Hausa ($M = 3.5$), moderate in Nigerian Pidgin ($M = 3.2$), and high for participants' native indigenous language ($M = 4.2$) but low for non-native indigenous languages ($M = 1.8$).

4.2 Structural Patterns of Code-Switching (Research Question 1)

Analysis of 1,247 recorded code-switching instances revealed the distribution of Poplack's (1980) structural types shown in Table 1.

Structural Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Primary Language Pairs
Intra-sentential	612	49.1	English-Hausa, English-Pidgin

Inter-sentential	498	39.9	English-Hausa, English-Indigenous
Tag-switching	137	11.0	English-Pidgin, Hausa-Pidgin
Total	1,247	100	—

Intra-sentential switching was the most frequent type (49.1%), occurring mainly between English and Hausa or English and Nigerian Pidgin, as in: “The lecturer ya ce [said] we should kawo [bring] our assignments go [to] his office daga [from] tomorrow.” Consistent with Poplack’s (1980) prediction, this pattern suggests high levels of multilingual competence rather than linguistic deficiency. Inter-sentential switching (39.9%) typically occurred at clause boundaries, often marking a shift from academic English to social Hausa or Pidgin, while tag-switching (11.0%) was the least frequent, generally involving interjections such as “kai”. By language pair, English-Hausa switching was most common (42.3%), particularly in formal academic contexts, followed by English-Pidgin (31.7%), English-indigenous language (18.5%), and Hausa-Pidgin (7.5%). Analysis of the syntactic sites of intra-sentential switching, following Rasdi’s (2016) approach, is presented in Table 2.

Syntactic Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Nouns	302	49.3
Verbs	165	27.0
Adjectives	63	10.3
Discourse Markers	29	4.7
Conjunctions	28	4.6
Adverbs	25	4.1
Total	612	100

Nouns constituted the largest switched category (49.3%), followed by verbs (27.0%), consistent with the equivalence constraint (Poplack, 1980), which predicts that switching occurs most readily at points where the surface structures of both languages map onto one another; function words such as conjunctions proved more resistant to switching due to their deeper syntactic integration.

4.3 Communicative and Social Functions of Code-Switching (Research Question 2)

Analysis of interview, questionnaire and observational data identified seven functions of code-switching, summarized in Table 3.

Function	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Pedagogical scaffolding / comprehension bridging	170	28.4
Social solidarity and identity assertion	133	22.1

Affective expression and emphasis	101	16.8
Classroom management and participation regulation	74	12.3
Quotation and reported speech	61	10.2
Addressee specification	40	6.7
Euphemism and face-saving	21	3.5
Total	600	100

Pedagogical scaffolding and comprehension bridging (28.4%) was the most frequent function, with students switching from English to Hausa or Pidgin to clarify difficult academic concepts; as one focus group participant explained, when a lecturer's English explanation was unclear, a peer's explanation in Hausa or Pidgin allowed immediate comprehension. Social solidarity and identity assertion (22.1%) emerged as a powerful “we-code” function among co-ethnic students, particularly in hostel and association settings, corroborating Gumperz (1982) and Shehu and Yau (2024). Affective expression (16.8%) allowed students to convey emotion more authentically, with Nigerian Pidgin especially favored for humor and frustration. Classroom management (12.3%) was primarily a lecturer-initiated function, used to gain attention or issue directives, consistent with Canagarajah (1995) and Nkopuruk et al. (2026). The remaining functions—quotation and reported speech (10.2%), addressee specification (6.7%), and euphemism or face-saving (3.5%)—demonstrated the interactional sophistication with which students and lecturers alike deployed code-switching to manage complex social configurations, consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

Taken together, these findings indicate that code-switching among students in Adamawa State's higher institutions is structurally systematic and functionally diverse. The predominance of intra-sentential switching contradicts deficit perspectives that associate code-switching with linguistic inadequacy, instead reflecting advanced multilingual competence. The functional analysis shows that code-switching is not merely a gap-filling strategy for insufficient English proficiency but a deliberate, multifunctional communicative resource, supporting the translanguaging perspective that multilingual speakers draw on their entire linguistic repertoire strategically (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). A notable attitudinal gap also emerged: students overwhelmingly view code-switching as a learning resource, while lecturers remain more ambivalent, often framing it as a threat to English standards a discrepancy reflecting broader ideological tensions in postcolonial educational contexts (Eneremadu et al., 2024). The findings also carry theoretical implications beyond the immediate Nigerian context. By demonstrating that students navigate among four languages English, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages often within a single utterance, the data challenge binary models of code-switching that assume alternation between only two linguistic systems, lending support to more dynamic, repertoire-based approaches such as translanguaging theory (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). At the same time, the study validates Gumperz's (1982) interactional framework in a new sociolinguistic setting, confirming the presence of quotation, addressee specification, and message qualification functions while also surfacing

functions such as ethnic solidarity marking and face-saving within hierarchical lecturer-student relationships that are especially salient in the Nigerian postcolonial educational context.

5. Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study investigated the structural nature and communicative functions of code-switching among students in Adamawa State's higher institutions. In relation to Research Question 1, findings show that code-switching is structurally systematic, with intra-sentential switching predominating (49.1%), followed by inter-sentential (39.9%) and tag-switching (11.0%), and with nouns and verbs as the most frequently switched syntactic categories, patterns indicating high levels of multilingual competence among students. In relation to Research Question 2, findings show that code-switching is functionally diverse, serving seven identifiable purposes, most prominently pedagogical scaffolding (28.4%), social solidarity (22.1%), and affective expression (16.8%), confirming that code-switching operates as a strategic communicative resource rather than a marker of linguistic deficiency.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutions should develop explicit multilingual language policies that recognize code-switching as a legitimate pedagogical strategy, in line with the provisions of the National Language Policy (2022).
2. Lecturer training programmes should incorporate modules on multilingual pedagogy, helping educators view code-switching as a cognitive and social resource rather than a threat to English standards.
3. Subject-specific bilingual resources, such as glossaries and concept explanations, should be developed to support strategic classroom translanguaging.
4. Further research should pursue longitudinal studies of code-switching across academic years, comparative studies across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, and investigation of code-switching in digital and online learning environments.

5.3 Conclusion

Code-switching in Adamawa State's higher institutions is not a symptom of linguistic deficiency but a sophisticated communicative strategy that reflects the multilingual reality of Nigerian society. The study demonstrates that embracing, rather than suppressing, students' multilingual repertoires can enhance learning, promote inclusion, and validate cultural identity. Rather than advocating for the abandonment of English, the study calls for a more nuanced approach that recognizes English as one valuable resource among many in students' multilingual repertoires—an approach grounded in empirical evidence and responsive to the local linguistic realities of Nigeria's higher education system.

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