
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Code-Switching and Multilingualism in African Urban Communication

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| ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of code-switching and multilingualism has become a defining feature of communication in African urban contexts, reflecting the continent's linguistic diversity and complex sociocultural dynamics. This short research review article explores how code-switching operates as both a communicative strategy and a marker of identity among urban speakers in multilingual African cities such as Nairobi, Lagos, Johannesburg, and Accra. Drawing upon existing sociolinguistic literature, the review highlights how individuals alternate between languages such as English, Swahili, indigenous tongues, and urban vernaculars like Sheng or Pidgin to negotiate meaning, express solidarity, and navigate social hierarchies. The article discusses the pragmatic, cultural, and psychological motivations behind code-switching, showing that it is not random linguistic mixing but a systematic and context-dependent practice that reflects speakers' linguistic competence and social awareness. Furthermore, the review examines the impact of globalization, urbanization, and digital media on the evolution of multilingual communication patterns. The increasing role of social media platforms has expanded the visibility of code-switching, turning it into a dynamic tool for identity construction, humor, and creativity in digital discourse. The study also considers how educational and political policies influence attitudes toward multilingualism, often creating tension between the promotion of indigenous languages and the dominance of global languages such as English and French. Ultimately, this article argues that code-switching and multilingualism in African urban spaces represent a rich linguistic resource that embodies flexibility, innovation, and cultural hybridity. Understanding these phenomena contributes to a broader appreciation of Africa's sociolinguistic complexity and provides insights into how language functions as a bridge between tradition and modernity in a rapidly globalizing world.

| KEYWORDS

Code-switching, multilingualism, urban communication, identity, sociolinguistics, Africa

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Africa is home to an extraordinary range of linguistic diversity, with more than two thousand languages spoken across the continent. In this vast multilingual landscape, urban areas such as Nairobi, Lagos, Johannesburg, and Accra have become key sites for complex linguistic interaction (Beck, 2010; Versluys, 2008). The coexistence of indigenous languages, colonial languages, and emerging urban vernaculars has created a dynamic sociolinguistic environment where code-switching and multilingual communication are not only common but also essential tools for everyday interaction (Eastman, 1992; Kamwangamalu, 2010). As people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds converge in cities for economic, educational, and social opportunities, they engage in linguistic practices that reflect adaptation, identity negotiation, and cultural hybridity (Rojas, 2025; Stavans & Porat, 2019).

Code-switching—the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation or utterance—has long been recognized as a central feature of multilingual societies (Bandia, 1996; Mesthrie & Hurst, 2013). In African urban settings, it functions as a communicative strategy that enables speakers to navigate between various linguistic codes, expressing nuances of meaning, social identity, and group solidarity (Rose & Van Dulm, 2006; Swigart, 1992). It is often used to mark social relationships, convey respect, emphasize emotion, or achieve clarity when one language lacks an appropriate term. Beyond its conversational utility, code-switching is a manifestation of the multilingual speaker's competence, creativity, and cultural awareness (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Meeuwis & Blommaert, 2013). It highlights the ability to move fluidly across linguistic and social boundaries, symbolizing both the diversity and unity of African urban life.

Multilingualism in African cities, on the other hand, extends beyond simple language alternation. It reflects broader social, political, and historical realities. The colonial legacy introduced European languages such as English, French, and Portuguese, which coexist with indigenous tongues like Swahili, Yoruba, Zulu, and Akan (Beck, 2010; Kamwangamalu, 2010). Urbanization has further intensified this coexistence, giving rise to hybrid forms such as Sheng in Kenya and Nigerian Pidgin in West Africa (Versluys, 2008; Strauss, 2016). These linguistic blends represent the evolution of African languages under conditions of social mobility, migration, and globalization (Stavans & Porat, 2019; Rojas, 2025). They also challenge traditional notions of linguistic purity and standardization, showing that language is constantly shaped by the sociocultural environment in which it exists.

In recent years, the rise of digital communication has further expanded the contexts in which multilingualism and code-switching occur. Social media platforms, text messaging, and online forums have provided new spaces for linguistic experimentation, where speakers mix languages to express identity, humor, and creativity (Androutsopoulos, 2013). In these virtual environments, code-switching becomes both a personal and collective performance, reflecting the linguistic realities of African urban youth and their global connectivity.

This review article explores the phenomenon of code-switching and multilingualism in African urban communication by drawing on key studies in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and communication theory. It aims to highlight how these linguistic practices function as adaptive strategies in multilingual settings, how they contribute to identity construction, and how they reflect broader social changes. Understanding the dynamics of code-switching and multilingualism in African cities offers valuable insights into the continent's linguistic resilience, creativity, and the ways in which language continues to evolve as a marker of modern African identity (Eastman, 1992; Beck, 2010; Stavans & Porat, 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Code-Switching and Multilingualism

Scholarly discussions on code-switching and multilingualism have evolved considerably over the past few decades, providing diverse theoretical frameworks for understanding language use in complex sociolinguistic settings (Bandia, 1996; Eastman, 1992; Kamwangamalu, 2010). Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation, sentence, or discourse. In multilingual African contexts, this phenomenon is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but rather an expression of linguistic competence and communicative flexibility (Mesthrie & Hurst, 2013; Swigart, 1992). Multilingualism, meanwhile, describes the coexistence and functional use of multiple languages by individuals or communities, a norm well-documented in African linguistic studies (Beck, 2010; Versluys, 2008). In African societies, multilingualism is shaped by historical, cultural, and political processes (Kamwangamalu, 2010; Strauss, 2016). The interaction between these two concepts forms the foundation for understanding how language operates as both a social and communicative tool in African urban spaces (Rojas, 2025; Stavans & Porat, 2019).

2.2 Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Code-Switching in Africa

Sociolinguistic research emphasizes that code-switching in African cities is a socially meaningful act (Rose & Van Dulm, 2006; Swigart, 1992). It serves various functions, including signaling group identity, demonstrating solidarity, and managing power relations (Mesthrie & Hurst, 2013; Strauss, 2016). For example, in Nairobi, Kenya, urban youth often switch between English, Swahili, and Sheng to express belonging to a modern, urban identity (Versluys, 2008). Similarly, in Lagos, Nigeria, the interplay between English, Yoruba, and Pidgin English reflects speakers' social aspirations and situational context (Jegede, 2012; Beck, 2010). Code-switching thus operates as a pragmatic strategy that encodes social meanings and maintains conversational harmony (Bandia, 1996; Rojas, 2025). These sociolinguistic patterns reinforce the idea that language choice is context-dependent and deeply embedded in social awareness (Eastman, 1992; Stavans & Porat, 2019).

2.3 Urbanization, Language Contact, and Hybrid Vernaculars

The rise of urban centers across Africa has intensified language contact, leading to the emergence of hybrid linguistic forms such as Sheng, Camfranglais, and Nouchi (Beck, 2010; Versluys, 2008). These mixed codes represent innovative responses to

multilingual realities in rapidly urbanizing contexts (Mesthrie & Hurst, 2013; Strauss, 2016). Scholars emphasize that such urban vernaculars function not only as communication tools but also as markers of youth identity and linguistic resistance (Rojas, 2025; Stavans & Porat, 2019). The fluid linguistic practices observed in African cities illustrate speakers' creative capacity to merge languages and develop new expressions aligned with their urban social experiences (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Meeuwis & Blommaert, 2013).

2.4 Digital Communication and the Evolution of Multilingual Practices

Recent studies highlight the role of digital media in reshaping multilingual practices (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Rojas, 2025). Online platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok provide new arenas for language mixing, particularly among urban youth (Androutsopoulos, 2013). In African cities, these digital interactions reflect the intersection of globalization and local identity expression (Stavans & Porat, 2019). The digital environment has amplified the visibility of code-switching and helped preserve and transform urban linguistic culture (Strauss, 2016; Versluys, 2008).

2.5 Language Policy, Education, and Attitudes Toward Multilingualism

Language policy and education across Africa significantly influence multilingual practices (Agbozo & ResCue, 2021; Kamwangamalu, 2010). Many countries prioritize English, French, or Portuguese as official languages, which creates tension with indigenous languages in formal education (Beck, 2010; Jegede, 2012). However, urban multilingual speakers frequently blend languages fluidly in informal and digital communication (Rose & Van Dulm, 2006; Androutsopoulos, 2013). Studies show that positive attitudes toward multilingualism can enhance social cohesion and educational outcomes (Agbozo & ResCue, 2021; Rojas, 2025). Recognizing code-switching as a legitimate linguistic practice is essential for developing inclusive language policies that reflect Africa's linguistic diversity (Bandia, 1996; Stavans & Porat, 2019).

3. Methodology

This short research review article employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach to examine code-switching and multilingualism in African urban communication. The study involves an extensive review of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference papers, and reports in the fields of sociolinguistics, urban studies, and African linguistics. Key databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and university libraries were used to collect literature that addresses linguistic practices, social functions, and technological influences on multilingual communication in urban African settings.

The methodology focuses on synthesizing findings from previous empirical studies and theoretical analyses to identify patterns, motivations, and social implications of code-switching. The selection criteria prioritized studies conducted in major African urban centers, including Nairobi, Lagos, Johannesburg, and Accra, where multilingualism and hybrid vernaculars are prevalent. Emphasis was placed on works that explored both spoken and digital communication contexts, as well as studies examining youth language practices, social identity construction, and language attitudes.

Data analysis involved thematic coding and comparative evaluation of recurring concepts, such as identity expression, social cohesion, language contact, and technological adaptation. By integrating insights from multiple sources, the review provides a comprehensive understanding of how code-switching and multilingualism operate as adaptive strategies, social markers, and communicative tools in African urban contexts, highlighting both historical and contemporary dynamics.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of existing studies on code-switching and multilingualism in African urban contexts reveals a multifaceted linguistic landscape shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors. A prominent finding across the reviewed literature is that code-switching is not merely a conversational strategy but a social tool reflecting identity, solidarity, and power dynamics (Rojas, 2025; Stavans & Porat, 2019). Studies conducted in cities such as Nairobi, Lagos, and Johannesburg indicate that individuals frequently alternate between indigenous languages, regional lingua francas, and global languages based on context and social status (Beck, 2010; Eastman, 1992). This aligns with the broader theoretical view that code-switching serves both communicative efficiency and symbolic functions (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Bandia, 1996).

Empirical evidence further suggests that code-switching often functions as a marker of social identity in African urban environments. Young urbanites demonstrate high-frequency switching in informal speech, especially in social media, markets, and peer conversations (Mesthrie & Hurst, 2013; Agbozo & ResCue, 2021). In Lagos, the blend of Yoruba, Pidgin, and English enables speakers to navigate complex social hierarchies (Jegede, 2012; Kamwangamalu, 2010). Similarly, in Nairobi, the interplay between Swahili, English, and Sheng mirrors the city's linguistic heterogeneity (Versluys, 2008; Rose & Van Dulm, 2006). These

patterns reveal that code-switching facilitates humor, in-group belonging, and social negotiation (Swigart, 1992; Meeuwis & Blommaert, 2013).

Socioeconomic and educational factors further influence multilingual practices. Urban residents with higher education levels tend to integrate more English into their speech, while maintaining indigenous languages for cultural grounding (Strauss, 2016; Kamwangamalu, 2010). Meanwhile, speakers with limited formal education rely primarily on local languages but still draw on English expressions for prestige or clarity (Jegede, 2012; Eastman, 1992). These dynamics demonstrate that code-switching is shaped by social stratification and linguistic capital (Stavans & Porat, 2019).

Digital communication introduces new dimensions to urban multilingualism. Platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter normalize and amplify code-switching, enabling users to creatively blend languages in virtual spaces (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Rojas, 2025). This trend fosters new urban subcultures and strengthens linguistic hybridity among youth (Mesthrie & Hurst, 2013).

Cultural identity remains a key theme across studies. Urban speakers use code-switching to balance global modernity with local tradition, such as alternating between English and Zulu in Johannesburg or Ga, Twi, and English in Accra (Beck, 2010; Versluys, 2008). This dual function underscores code-switching's symbolic and practical significance in urban Africa (Bandia, 1996; Swigart, 1992).

However, challenges also emerge. Frequent code-switching may reinforce language hierarchies and contribute to diminishing proficiency in certain indigenous languages, particularly among youth (Strauss, 2016; Agbozo & ResCue, 2021). The tension between innovation and language preservation emphasizes the need for policies that support multilingual realities while protecting linguistic diversity (Rose & Van Dulm, 2006; Stavans & Porat, 2019).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that code-switching in African urban centers is pervasive, strategic, and socially meaningful. It facilitates communication, identity negotiation, and adaptation to globalizing urban environments. Future research should examine longitudinal shifts and digital influences on multilingual practices in emerging urban spaces (Rojas, 2025; Androutsopoulos, 2013).

5. Conclusion

This review has highlighted the central role of code-switching and multilingualism in shaping communication practices within African urban centers. The evidence demonstrates that code-switching is far more than a linguistic habit; it is a dynamic social strategy that reflects identity, cultural negotiation, and adaptability in rapidly changing urban environments. Across various cities, including Nairobi, Lagos, Johannesburg, and Accra, urban speakers strategically alternate between local languages, regional lingua francas, and global languages such as English or French to navigate complex social, professional, and cultural landscapes. These patterns underscore the functional and symbolic significance of multilingualism in daily interactions, whether in informal peer conversations, workplace communication, or digital platforms.

The review also reveals that code-switching serves as a marker of social identity and group belonging, allowing speakers to assert urban sophistication while maintaining ties to their cultural roots. Socioeconomic status, education, and digital media engagement further influence these linguistic practices, highlighting the intersection of language, social stratification, and technology. Digital communication platforms, in particular, have amplified the prevalence and creativity of code-switching, fostering hybridized linguistic forms that are uniquely urban and expressive.

However, the findings point to tensions inherent in multilingual urban communication. While code-switching promotes flexibility and innovation, it can inadvertently reinforce language hierarchies or contribute to the gradual erosion of indigenous language competencies. These challenges emphasize the need for awareness of both the benefits and limitations of urban multilingual practices.

In conclusion, code-switching and multilingualism in African cities are essential communicative tools that facilitate social cohesion, identity negotiation, and practical interaction in diverse urban settings. Recognizing the complexity and adaptive nature of these practices is crucial for understanding urban communication, informing language policy, and supporting the preservation of linguistic diversity amidst ongoing globalization and digital transformation.

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