

Code-Switching: An Expression of Nigerian Socio-Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Code-switching is a language phenomenon that involves the use of two or more languages in conversations. It is used for several purposes, among which is to reveal cultural identity. The aim of this study is to observe Nigerians' perception of code-switching and the identity they wish to create when they code-switch. Data were collected through questionnaire from twenty-one multilingual residents of Afikpo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The purposive sampling method was used to select only the respondents that speak more than one language. The collected data were quantitatively analysed and the findings showed that all the participants code-switch for different purposes, which include to reveal, maintain and negotiate cultural, social and professional identities. The participants also reveal that code-switching enables the exclusion of uninvited participants in communication as well as make it easy for them to interact. The study concludes that code-switching is a linguistic phenomenon that makes communication effective and efficient while marking the socio-cultural identity of the participants.

Keywords: code-switching, identity, culture, social identity theory

Introduction

Language is basically used for communication of thoughts, ideas, opinions, and information. It is also used as a tool for persuasion, influencing, inspiring, motivating, teaching and passing on values. Apart from these, language is used to carry out actions, such as appointing, promoting, demoting, accepting, admitting, expelling, and discharging (Akinwotu, 2021). In addition to all these functions performed by language, it acts as an identity marker.

The function of language as an identity marker can never be overemphasised. People's cultural, social, psychological, educational, religious, and emotional experiences reflect in their language (Lawal et al., 2025). The choice of words people make and the way they structure their sentences reveal their knowledge, belief system and thought processes. For instance, when people say, "God bless you," you can tell that the person is a Christian or has a close connection with Christianity. An individual that makes grammatically correct English expressions in Nigeria can be identified as someone that is well educated. These instances point at how utterances show what people know. However, these illustrations involve the use of one language in communication.

There are situations, where people interact with more than one languages in one communication. In some instances, people tend to switch from one language to another when the communication environment or situation changes. For example, an individual that speaks English in the office might decide to switch to Nigerian Pidgin while interacting with a mechanic at the car repair shop. At home, the same individual may switch between English and his native language at the sentential level and within a conversation. These instances of language switching are known as code switching. Code switching is common among bi/multilingual speakers, who tend to switch between languages to suit communicative needs (Edward et al., 2025), participants (Razali et al., 2024), and situations (Nazrim & Kassim, 2023). As people switch between languages, they tend to reveal who they are and what they know. It has also been observed that people tend to switch languages or language varieties to include or exclude communication participants (Edward et al., 2025). Nevertheless, even though multilingual speakers code-switch often, their perception of the linguistic phenomenon has not been given adequate attention. As a result, there is scanty of information regarding how language users, especially Nigerians, perceive their use of code-switching.

The aim of this study is to observe how Nigerians view code-switching. Specifically, the study focuses on identifying whether Nigerians code-switch to mark their identity and reveal their culture. Hence, the research questions that guide this study are: (1) “How do Nigerians perceive code-switching as a communicative event?” and (2) “What identity do Nigerians wish to create when they code-switch?”

The Concept of Identity

Identity, according to Merry (2010), refers to the understanding of a person as an individual than as a product of culture, history or a caste. He states that identity is not static because it is ever-evolving and continues to change as people’s understanding of who they are changes. Inac and Unal (2013) explain that a person’s identity includes the individual’s ethnic, religious, national and political identities because they are the factors by which the person will be referred. They further state that identity is the definition or description of existence. Jajarami et al. (2025) argue that it is inappropriate to explain identity as a single entity because an individual can be described through multiple dimensions. They reveal that the identity of an individual has to do with how he sees himself and how the society sees him. In other words, there are multiple dimensions to an individual’s identity because how a person sees himself may be different from how others see him.

According to Vignoles (2018), identity is simply the answer to the question, “Who are you?” She states that the answer to this question depends on who asked and answered it. When an individual asks himself this question, his response is bound to be different from when he is asked the same question by others. In addition, the responses given to different individuals are different because identity also shows social relationship. Ibanga (2013) also agrees that identity is a social phenomenon. He states that identity is the mark of recognition as well as the characteristics used to describe an individual. He believes that identity indicates where an individual belongs. This belongingness can be the individual’s nationality, social, cultural and political environments, religion, and psychological well-being. In other words, an individual’s identity is a totality of who they are at different environments and point in time.

The Concept of Code-Switching

Code-switching is a linguistic phenomenon that is found among language users that can speak more than one language. Yim and Clement (2021) describe it as a spontaneous switch from one language to another within a single communication event. They argue that the concept is only practiced by individuals that have become competent in the languages involved in the communication. Yim and Clement hold that code-switching only involves two languages, thereby indicating that switching three or more languages should be referred to as code-switching. Ahmad (2012), however, states that code-switching involves the use of two or more

languages in a single communication but goes ahead to state that it is practiced by bilinguals. In other words, the linguistic concept is only used by people that speak two languages.

Khalilli (2025) explains that code-switching is the act of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties during a conversation. This description does not only show that code-switching can involve more than two languages but also asserts that the switching could be between language varieties. This notion is also adopted by Nilep (2006) who views the concept as a switch between language varieties. Authors, such as Nazri and Kassim (2023), Jain (2024), and Medi (2024), also describe the concept as the alternation between two or more languages in a single conversation. Nevertheless, Hall and Nilep (2015) describe it simply as the alternation of languages in conversations. This latter description presents code-switching as a linguistic phenomenon that involves switching from one language to another in a single or multiple conversations. What this means is that code-switching also takes place when a language user changes from one language to another in different communication events. The current study therefore perceives code-switching as the alternation of two or more languages or language varieties in a singular or multiple communication events.

Previous Studies on Code-Switching and Cultural Identity

Several studies have examined the use of code-switching in oral and spoken communication and the roles performed by the linguistic phenomenon. Ahmad (2012) examines the use of this concept in foreign language teaching and observes that teachers adopt code-switching to make their works easier and more understandable. In most cases, they switch codes to make the learners more comfortable and confident because still find the opportunity to communicate in a language they understand. Yim and Clement (2021) examine code-switching among different bicultural subgroups in Canada and realise that the easiest way to identify people of different culture is through the component languages they use to code-switch. They observe that the stronger a bicultural subgroup is, the higher their chances of code-switching is and the more positive their perception of the phenomenon is. Yim and Clement discover that the culture which a bicultural subgroup is oriented to can be identified from the members' code-switching component languages.

Edward et al. (2025) reveal that literary writers adopt code-switching as a strategy to convey intricate and intimate information about the culture of their characters. Apart from that, their study reveal that the linguistic device helps in language maintenance in that it can help to immortalise certain expressions. This indicates that Nigerian literary artists, such as Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie, do not adopt code-switching as a literary style but as a way of depicting the true culture of their characters while saving the language in use. Nazri and Kassim (2023) also identify the use of code-switching in popular culture for stylistic, persuasive, meaning construction, and identity building purposes. They observe that advertisers tend to adopt the concept as their means of reaching out to specific target, who they use the language to identify with. In such instances, the target audience recognise the language, understand the message, and adopt the product as theirs.

Besides using code-switching in literature and language teaching, the linguistic concept is found in digital communication. Hall and Nlep (2015) state that in the midst of globalisation, code-switching acts as a means of identification. This indicates that even in digital interaction, where people across the world communicate without the restriction of physical distance, code-switching helps in the identification of people socio-cultural groups. Nazri and Kassim (2023) also observe that some digital advertisements use code-switching as a creative style. Code-switching, therefore, provides a linguistic window for people to say who they are in a global community.

Code-switching is also known to act as a tool for negotiation. After examining the use of the linguistic device by a group of adolescents in Jakarta, Razali et al. (2024) observe that youths use it to reveal their identity and negotiate acceptance into certain social groups. Jain (2024) explains that the component languages of code-switching give different information

about the speaker. She states that the use of foreign language, such as English, acts as a social marker while the use of regional language or the native language marks the speaker's cultural group. In other words, when people code-switch, they reveal their social and cultural identities.

While observing the use of code-switching in the workplace, Mehdi (2024) observes that it fosters inclusivity. He discovers that when people switch languages to communicate effectively with certain listeners, they indirectly invite them to participate in the ongoing conversation. This has been observed to encourage workers' engagement and active participation in the organisation. In addition to this, Nlep (2006) observes that code-switching allows language users to contextualise conversations. For example, when speakers switch from one language to another, they automatically switch the context of conversation from one culture to another. This behaviour also changes the atmosphere of the conversation and informs the audience of who is invited to join in the conversation and who is not. This shows that while code-switching fosters inclusivity in communication, it also creates room for exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory as its theoretical framework. This theory examines and explains how individuals construct, negotiate and express their identities within social groups. It proposes that people tend to behave in ways that reflect their cultural and social norms. It argues that people's identity is constructed by the group they belong. As a result, they unconsciously develop a positive bias towards members of their groups and a negative bias towards non-members. As a result, they develop an 'us' vs 'them' perception of their group members and non-members.

As mentioned earlier, people act in ways that reflect their group's behaviour and culture. One of the ways they do this is by using the language that is commonly used by the group he belongs to. In this case, language functions as a salient marker of group identity because it identifies the speaker's culture, social status, and ethnicity. This explains why code-switching acts as an identity marker because the component languages or language varieties reveal descriptive information about the speaker. Put differently, when people code-switch, the languages they switch between reveal who they are and what they know. In addition, they signal affiliation or disaffiliation with groups. For instance, switching to an indigenous language or dialect during a conversation shows solidarity, shared cultural heritage, or intimacy, whereas switching to a global or official language, such as English, indicates modernity, education, or institutional authority.

Furthermore, Social Identity Theory highlights that identity is not fixed but context dependent. In the case of code-switching, speakers may shift linguistic codes to negotiate social boundaries, manage impressions and maintain social identity. In multilingual contexts, such as Nigeria, where multiple languages coexist, code-switching becomes a powerful mechanism to manage the overlapping identities tied to ethnicity, region and social class. Here, language choice is used to indicate the specific identity adopted in a given interaction. For example, an individual may switch from the Standard English variety in an official environment to Nigerian Pidgin among peers, and further to an indigenous language in family settings to establish different identities and social roles in his community. With code-switching, the concerned language user is able to maintain his positions in the captured settings.

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory offers a robust analytical lens for examining the use and perception of code-switching among the selected participants. It offers the theoretical perspective for examining the situational factors that trigger code-switching and explores the relationship between language, power and culture.

Methodology

Data for the study were collected from twenty-one multilingual residents of Afikpo, Ebonyi State, who were purposively selected because of their fluency in more than one language fluently. The instrument of data collection was a Likert scale questionnaire, which contained two sets of questions. The first section of the questionnaire collected the participants' demographic information while the second part contained ten 5-scale Likert statements that focus on language users' perception of code-switching. The questionnaires were issued physically and also returned physically after they were completed. The responses to the questionnaire were quantitatively analysed using the simple percentage method. This technique shows the frequency of the responses to both components of the questionnaire to enable the study to identify the highest occurring perceptions from the participants. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory provided the theoretical lens for data analysis and discussion of findings.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis of the data is divided into two to show the two parts of the questionnaire. The first part analyses the demographic data of the respondents while the second section analyses the 5-point Likert scale statement.

4.1.1 Analysis of Demographic Data.

The participants were asked to provide demographic information. Their responses were captured on Tables 1 to 5.

Table 1. Gender of Respondents

s/ n	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	7	33%
2	Female	12	57%
3	Non- indicated	2	10%
4	Total	21	100%

Table 1 shows the gender of the participants in the survey. It reveals that a majority of the participants are females, with their number representing 57% of the samples. Seven participants, representing 33% of the samples, are males. Nevertheless, two participants, who represent approximately 10% of the samples, did not indicate their gender.

Table 2. Ages of the Participants

s/ n	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	10 years	0	0%
2	11-20 years	5	23.8%
3	21-30 years	6	28.6%
4	31 and above	10	47.6%
5	Total	21	100%

Table 2 shows the age of the participants. From the data presented on the table, participants in the age bracket of 31 years and above formed the highest group by representing 47.6% of the samples. Those in the age bracket of 21 to 30 years were the next because the sample size represents 28.6% of the total samples. This latter group is closely followed by participants between the age of 11 and 20 years. They represent 23.8% of the sample size. No participant was recorded below the age of eleven.

Table 3. Educational Levels of the Participants

s/n	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	No formal education	0	0%
2	Secondary school education	6	29%
3	First degree	11	52%

4	Postgraduate degree	4	19%
5	Non-indicated	0	0%
6	Total	21	100%

Table 3 shows that all the participants have formal education. Six participants, who represent 29% of the samples, had secondary education, while four participants, representing 19% of the samples, had postgraduate degree. The table further shows that the participants with a first degree formed the highest group because they represent 52% of the total samples.

Table 4. How many languages do you speak?

s/n	Item (languages)	Frequency	Percentage
1	One	0	0%
2	Two	8	38%
3	Three	12	57%
4	More than three	1	5%
5	Total	21	100%

Table 4 presents the participants' responses to the number of languages they speak. It shows that only one participant, representing 5% of the samples, can speak more than three languages fluently. Twelve participants, representing 57% of the sample size, can speak three languages fluently. The remaining eight participants, who represent 38% of the samples, can only speak two languages fluently. None of the participants speaks only one language. The table, therefore, shows that all the participants are multilingual.

Table 5. Places where you grew up

s/n	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	Rural	4	19%
2	Semi-rural	8	38%
3	Urban	9	43%
4	Total	21	100%

Table 5 presents information concerning where the participants grew up. It shows that the participants who grew up in the urban area form the highest group by representing 43% of the samples. The participants that semi urban areas follow closely with 38% representation of the sample size. The participants that grew up in the rural areas form the smallest group because they represent 19% of the samples. Table 5, therefore, shows that a majority of the participants grew up in the urban area.

4.1.2 Analysis of Data on participants' perception of on the use of code-switching during interaction.

People were asked to select options that show their perception and observation about the use of code-switching during interaction. Table 6 presents their responses.

Table 6. Perception of Code-Switching in Conversations

s/n	Statement	SD		D		N		A		SA	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	I code-switch to balance my professional and cultural identity	2	9.5%	2	9.5%	4	19%	8	38%	5	24%
2	I intentionally use my native language to assert my cultural identity in public	1	4.8%	2	9.5%	3	14.3%	8	38.1%	7	33.3

3	I avoid using my indigenous language in conversations	6	29%	8	38%	3	14%	4	19%	-	0%
4	I mix languages to make conversation feel more relaxed	2	9.5%	2	9.5%	4	19%	8	38%	5	24%
5	I use code-switching to exclude people who don't understand my language	2	9.5%	2	9.5%	3	14%	6	29%	8	38%
6	I change languages depending on who I'm talking with	-	0%	-	0%	4	19%	7	33%	10	48%
7	I switch languages to show my cultural background	1	4.8%	1	4.8%	2	9.5%	8	38%	9	42.9%
8	If we stop code-switching, future generations will lose our cultural identity	-	0%	-	0%	4	19%	6	29%	11	52%
9	I use different languages to fit into different social groups	-	0%	2	9.5%	5	23.8%	6	28.6%	8	38.1%
10	Using native language boosts self-esteem	2	9.5%	6	29%	7	33%	4	19%	2	9.5%

Table 6 presents the responses of the participants to queries concerning their perception of code-switching in conversations. It shows that a majority of the participants code-switch for various purposes. For example, they use it to create a balance in their cultural and professional identities (no. 1), assert cultural identity in the public (nos. 2 & 7), make conversations more relaxed (no. 4), exclude participants in conversations (no. 5) and negotiate cultural (no. 6) and social (no. 9) identities. A majority of the participants also believe that code-switching preserves cultural identity (no. 8), nevertheless, most of them are neutral towards the ability of native language to boost self-esteem.

Discussion of Findings

The examination of the responses provided by the participants show that they are bi/multilinguals and that a majority of them code-switch despite their advanced educational levels. However, their perceptions of code-switching differ. The participants show that code-switching helps them reveal, maintain and negotiate professional, social and cultural identities. They also believe that code-switching enables the exclusion of uninvited participants in conversations, the preservation of cultural identity, and the ease of communication.

Coincidentally, the findings of this study affirm the submissions of previous related scholarships, especially on the socio-cultural impacts of code-switching in societies. For example, the present study observes that participants perceive code-switching as their cultural identity marker. This observation aligns with the submission of Yim and Clement (2021), who observes that the identity of bicultural groups can be determined by the languages used in code-switching. The observation of this current study on the use of code-switching for the exclusion of certain participants in communication aligns with the observation of Edward et al. (2025), who disclose that code-switching allows people to have intimate conversations. In other words, they can exclude those that should not participate in the conversation by code-switching.

Conclusion

Code-switching is the alternation of languages in conversations. It is commonly found among language users that can use two or more languages efficiently. Code-switching is practiced by people of different cultural, profession and social groups and it marks their identities. Put differently, when people code-switch, they show who they are, the groups they associate with,

and what they do for a living. Their experiences and knowledge can also be discovered from their language. Furthermore, they can include and exclude participants in conversations and further communicate with ease if they use code-switching. All these show that code-switching is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a linguistic concept that enables efficient and effective communication while working as an identity marker.

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