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LINGUISTIC ATTITUDES AND LANGUAGE CHOICES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN A MULTILINGUAL GHANAIAN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Paul Anzah-Ackah Herzuah, Christiana Hammond
University of Media, Arts, and Communication, Accra, Ghana.
E-Mail: paulherzuah@gmail.com

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Abstract

In multilingual environments, language users continuously negotiate their linguistic identities by selecting among available languages to achieve specific communicative purposes. However, such choices are not random; they are shaped by context, domain, and attitudes toward each language. Anchored in Communication Accommodation Theory and Identity Negotiation Theory, this study examines students' language preferences within the academic setting of a Ghanaian university. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture students' linguistic choices and the factors influencing them in both academic and informal contexts. The findings indicate that students' language choices are driven by attitudinal orientations, situational contexts, and group membership dynamics. Elements such as time, place, interlocutors, and conversation topics significantly influence which language is chosen in a given interaction. The study highlights how multilingual students strategically adjust their linguistic behavior to align with social expectations and identity positioning. These insights have implications for understanding language attitudes and communication practices in multilingual educational and professional settings.

Keywords: *communication accommodation theory; Ghanian university; linguistic choices; multilingual.*

1. Introduction

In multilingual communication environments, language users draw from a rich linguistic repertoire to achieve various communicative goals. Their choices are often strategic, influenced by factors such as the nature of the relationship between interlocutors and the topic of conversation. Preference for one language over others can reflect speakers' perceptions of their own identity, as multilingual individuals are not only fluent in multiple languages but also participants in diverse cultural spheres. Apfelbaum and Meyer (2010) observe that several factors influence language preference in communication. While some multilinguals select a particular language to compensate for limited proficiency in another, others do so to align themselves with a specific social group—whether ethnic, national, peer, or ideological.

Contextual factors also play a significant role in shaping linguistic choices. Multilingual speakers must navigate appropriate language use depending on communicative domains and the linguistic repertoires of their interlocutors (Akrofi Ansah, 2016; Romaine, 2008). Thus, in multilingual speech communities, variables such as time, place, participants, and conversational topics are crucial in determining language choice. Attitudes toward language further influence these decisions. As Astuti (2021) notes, language attitude connects thought and action: learners with positive attitudes toward a language not only appreciate it intellectually but also express such attitudes behaviorally—by using and praising it frequently. People's attitudes toward a language often mirror their views of its speakers, the contexts in which it is used, and the social functions it serves. Consequently, positive attitudes encourage language use, while negative ones inhibit it.

Studies have shown persistent tensions between the prestige associated with English and the identity value of indigenous languages (Nyamekye, 2024; Lomotey & Rathert, 2024; Mensah et al., 2024). Multilingual individuals may therefore switch between languages, selecting the one most appropriate to the communicative situation (Dewi & Setiadi, 2018; Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014). In the Ghanaian context, Dako and Quarcoo (2017) observe that English enjoys high prestige, as it is perceived as the key to educational and socioeconomic advancement. English proficiency is thus linked to academic success and access to well-paid employment. Conversely, Ghanaian indigenous languages receive limited recognition, particularly in formal education settings (Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014). These authors further note that students who choose to study Ghanaian languages are often regarded as less capable, opting for easier subjects to secure good grades. Such perceptions stem from the belief that indigenous languages belong to the domestic sphere and are unworthy of academic study.

The issue of language choice as the official medium of instruction in academic institutions has long been a contentious topic that continues to attract scholarly attention. The debate typically centers on whether a target second language should be prioritized over indigenous languages or vice versa, as reflected in studies such as Twumasi (2021), Yildirim (2020), and Owu-Ewie and Edu-Buandoh (2014). Although language choice in such contexts is often determined by government policy, learners' attitudes toward the target language play a crucial role in the successful implementation of these policies. Previous studies on language choice within educational settings have largely concentrated on students' attitudes toward language instruction in classroom contexts (Astuti, 2021; Dewi & Setiadi, 2018; Hinmassia, 2024; Twumasi, 2021). However, there remains a paucity of research focusing on tertiary students' attitudes and linguistic choices beyond classroom interactions within the same educational environment. The present study addresses this gap by examining students' attitudes toward English as the medium of instruction in a Ghanaian university while also exploring their use of indigenous languages on campus. Particular attention is given to the motivations underlying their linguistic preferences and the contextual factors influencing their language choices. This study, therefore, seeks to answer the following research question: *What factors influence the linguistic choices of students in intergroup communication situations on campus?*

2. Literature Review

The choice of language in multilingual contexts is influenced by multiple interrelated factors. Some multilingual individuals select a particular language to compensate for limited proficiency in others, while others base their linguistic choices on the desire to identify with

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specific social groups—ethnic, national, peer, or ideological. At the heart of this linguistic behavior lies the issue of identity, a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which humans engage in social interaction (De Fina, 2016; Joseph, 2016). Central to the concept of identity are the notions of belonging and acceptance within society. The sense of belonging—whether to a gender, creed, ethnicity, nationality, or profession—is crucial to an individual's sense of self-worth and societal recognition. People often justify their affiliation with or detachment from a group based on the need to establish meaningful social links essential to personal and communal development. These affiliations are shaped by personal values, beliefs, and lived experiences emerging from continuous interaction with the social world. As Jenkins (2008) and Kitchen et al. (2015) explain, the need to belong or identify with a group forms the basis of community building, while Evans (2015) adds that individuals align themselves with social groups to avoid feelings of rejection, marginalization, or identity loss, thereby securing a sense of acceptance and security.

A critical dimension of identity construction is its fluid and shifting nature. Llamas and Watt (2010) emphasize that both language and identity are dynamic and continuously renegotiated in response to changing social contexts. Joseph (2010) further argues that individuals perform a repertoire of identities that shift depending on circumstances, reflecting constant processes of negotiation and re-negotiation. This view aligns with McWhorter (2014), who contends that people often adjust or reconfigure their identities to conform to prevailing social standards or to gain recognition and acceptance within their communities. Since identities are constructed through discourse and thought, language remains central to this process (Edwards, 2009; Kohli, 2012).

Language choice in multilingual speech communities is also shaped by domains and topics of interaction. Biachani (2015) identifies domain as a socially assigned function or communicative space that determines language use among participants. Romaine (2008) distinguishes five key domains—family, friendship, religion, employment, and education—within which multilingual individuals face different social pressures influencing language choice. Beyond domain, the topic of conversation may also dictate linguistic preference, as interlocutors select vocabulary and structure appropriate to the subject matter. Certain topics are often more naturally discussed in one language than another (Fishman, 2000; Bhatia & Ritchie, 2013). Holmes (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) further note that situational contexts—such as setting, participants' age, gender, occupation, and socioeconomic status, as well as conversational topic—serve as triggers for language selection in multilingual environments. Thus, all discourse in such settings reflects social interactional patterns that govern language behavior.

Llamas and Watt (2010) reaffirm that human identity and language continuously shift in response to interactional changes. This dynamic is exemplified in the Ghanaian context, where Agyekum (2010) observes that many Muslims in the northern regions shift from their Gur languages to Arabic as a lingua franca during Islamic worship. Similarly, speakers of the Bono dialect in southern Ghana often use the Asante variety of Akan in schools and other formal contexts, while the Ahanta language in the Western Region is frequently supplanted by the Fante dialect of Akan. These linguistic shifts, as Akrofi Ansah (2014) explains, reflect multilingual speakers' strategic efforts to select appropriate languages based on communicative domains and the linguistic repertoires of their interlocutors.

2.1 The Language Situation in Ghana

Ghana has a uniquely complex linguistic landscape with different indigenous languages employed for communication in diverse contexts of situations (Torto, 2014). According to Eberhard, et al (2020), there are eighty-one (81) languages in Ghana of which seventy-three (73) are indigenous and eight (8) are non-indigenous. English Language, as the lingua franca of Ghana, has 9.8 million second language (L2) speakers. It is the official language of government, judiciary and education. It is also used in formal situations such as churches, courts, schools, parliament, offices, media, meetings, and during public speech delivery. English is sometimes code mixed with the local language in informal spoken discourses (Torto, 2014). There are, however, eleven local languages: Ewe, Dagomba, Dagaaare, Ga, Nzema, Dangme, Gonja, Kasem, Fante, Twi and Guruni. These languages are government sponsored and supported by the Bureau of Ghana Languages. Akan is the most widespread indigenous language in Ghana, with 8.1 million first language (L1) speakers. Other widely spoken indigenous languages include Éwé (3.32 million speakers), Dagbani (1.16 million speakers), Dangme (1.02 million speakers), and Dagare (924,000 speakers), (Eberhard, et al. 2020; Torto, 2014). According to Huber (2012) Ghanaian Pidgin English is also widely spoken, with 5 million first language (L1) speakers. Dako and Quarcoo (2017) emphasise that most Ghanaian English speakers are bilingual with at least one local language in addition to English whilst more than 70% can speak an Akan dialect (Twi, Fante, etc.) They aver that British Standard English (BSE) is the written target language of education, and the language of instruction in all subjects except the Ghanaian Language as a subject. Further, Received Pronunciation (RP), is the examinable spoken norm and thus the target in spoken English. Pidgin English is part of the linguistic configuration of Ghana although it is not officially recognized as a language of Ghana and there is no standardized orthography. The variety of pidgin commonly spoken by students is mesolectal pidgin (Adika, 2012; Torto, 2014)

2.2 Theoretical Underpinning

This study is anchored on Ting- Toomey's (1999; 2005) Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) and Giles and Ogay's (2007) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). INT dwells on the essence of negotiating sociocultural membership identity and personal identity in inter-group communication situations. The theory posits that individuals tend to feel included when their desired group membership identities are positively endorsed via satisfactory outcomes such as feelings of being understood, respected, and valued. However, they may experience identity differentiation when their desired group membership are stigmatized which manifests in the degree of remoteness an individual perceives in regulating group-based boundaries with either in-group or out-group members. Closely connected to this theory is Giles' and Ogay's (2007) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) which focuses on the notion that interlocutors adjust and adapt to each other for a successful social interaction. Upon entering a communicative encounter, people begin to synchronize aspects of their verbal (e.g., accent, speech rate) and nonverbal behavior (e.g., gesture, posture). These adjustments, according to Giles, are at the core of communication accommodation theory (CAT). The theory identifies three basic adjustment strategies (convergence, divergence and maintenance) through which individuals can adjust their communicative behaviors relative to one another. Convergence refers to adjusting one's communicative behaviors to be more like another's. Divergence implies adjusting one's communicative behaviors to be more dissimilar to another's whilst maintenance

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involves sustaining one's "default" level of communicating, without adjusting for others. Giles and Ogay (2007) identify two distinct motives for adjusting communication. The first is affective motivation in which speakers can pursue positive personal and social identities by communicatively regulating social distance and signaling their attitudes toward each other as individuals and group members. Cognitive motivation on the other hand occurs when speakers are motivated to assess their interlocutors' communicative needs and characteristics and adjust their speech to be intelligible, predictable, and comprehensible. The two motives, according to Giles and Ogay (2007) are not mutually exclusive, and communicative behaviors may be motivated by both types of concerns. In the context of this study, INT and CAT combined to form a coherent analytical framework for examining how students linguistically construct and negotiate identities in a multilingual communicative environment. Whilst INT provided insight into how students negotiate in-group and out-group membership through expressions of identity inclusion and differentiation, CAT explained how they strategically adjust their speech styles to accommodate or resist linguistic alignment with peers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The integration of the two theories enabled an understanding of how identity processes are enacted through everyday communicative adjustments.

2.3 Related Studies

Hinmassia (2024) investigated language choice and attitudes of tertiary students in public institutions. Using domain analysis for the study, findings showed that students, the teaching staff, university administrators and support staff had both positive and negative attitudes towards their language choices which were made with contributing factors such mutual intelligibility, social inclusion/exclusion, intimacy, solidarity and work coordination. Also, Adomako and Akrobotu (2023) study concluded that pupils often developed unfavorable attitudes toward Ghanaian languages, influenced by parental expectations, school policies, and limited teaching resources. Twumasi (2021), studied the attitude of students towards the study of Ghanaian languages in a Ghanaian University and the motivational factors for the study of these languages. Results indicated that students had positive attitudes towards the study of Ghanaian indigenous languages whilst proffering instrumental reasons for the study of this language. In another perspective, Astuti (2021) investigated language attitude and choice of English by the second-year students of English Education study program of Palangka Raya University. Result showed that the students committed to the positive attitude on English with the explanation that English is important to be mastered. In the academic environment contexts, the students mostly used English as the main language but outside of the context they were more comfortable to use Bahasa Indonesia and even local languages. Similarly, Yildirim (2020) compared the language attitudes of Arabic-Turkish bilinguals from Mersin and Hatay cities located in the East Mediterranean Region of Anatolia. The comparison revealed that Arabic-Turkish bilinguals from Hatay interiorized Arabic language more than Arabic-Turkish bilinguals from Mersin with the first group using Arabic in their professional career and transferring it to the new generations. Dewi and Setiadi (2018) studied language attitude and language choice in bilingual academic learning environment at Bina Nusantara University in Indonesian. The study concluded that students of the English department hold positive attitude toward English, which were shown through the statements of the majority of the students who saw English as an international language that offered more career opportunities. The two main factors that determine the use of English are the role of the lecturers and the English

language exposure in the academic environment. Owu-Ewie and Edu-Buandoh (2014) investigated the negative attitude of Ghanaians towards the study of L1 in the SHS, and how SHS students studying their L1 coped with the negative attitude. Findings revealed that parents, school authorities, language teachers, students, and the general populace depicted negative attitudes towards Ghanaian language study in the SHS and these manifested in utterances, actions and behaviour. Whilst these studies largely focused on English as the language of instruction in the educational sector in Ghana, the literature depict gaps in the study of indigenous languages in academic communication environment.

3. Research Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach using a focus group discussion (FGD) to gain an in-depth understanding of the linguistic choices of students on campus. The research site was the Institute of Journalism campus of the University of Media, Arts and Communication, formerly Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ), a specialized University of communication in Ghana founded in 1959. A focus group discussion was held among ten participants comprising six women and four men who willfully decided to participate in the discussions. The sample size of ten participants was considered adequate for the focus group discussion, as it provided sufficient diversity of linguistic and cultural perspectives while maintaining a manageable group size that encouraged interactive, reflective, and in-depth discussion of multilingual communication experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

In this study, ethical procedures followed the Declaration of Helsinki, with verbal consent documented. The interaction took place on the campus of UniMAC-IJ. All the participants were sophomore students who had gained considerable experience in their academic and non-academic engagements on campus. The age of the participants ranged between 18 to 22 years indicating a very youthful peer group on campus. To ensure that students express themselves freely, the focus group discussions were conducted by a recently graduated teaching assistant and an efficient course representative of one of the classes who was very much known to the participants. These two were young and approachable, thus creating a relaxed atmosphere of peer attachment, trust and camaraderie. As a result, the FGD was held in a free non-intimidating environment. Participants were asked to respond to questions concerning their linguistic choices during academic and non-academic sessions on campus. They were instructed to ascribe reasons to the choices they made in their preference of a particular language of communication during interaction on campus. Adopting the thematic analysis method of qualitative study, the data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase systematic process of coding and theme development. After familiarizing with the transcripts through repeated readings, initial codes were generated to capture important interactional patterns. These codes were then refined and clustered into broader themes guided by the theoretical lenses of Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999; 2005) and Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Codes reflecting participants' expressions of belonging and distinctiveness were organized under identity negotiation dimensions, while those capturing convergence, divergence, and maintenance behaviors were grouped under communicative accommodation patterns. This integrative coding process ensured that the themes reflected participants' lived multilingual experiences. This study is limited in terms of sample size and research setting. The relatively small sample of ten participants, while sufficient for generating rich qualitative insights, restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations. Additionally, the study was conducted at a single university site, which

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may limit the transferability of results to other higher education contexts with different linguistic and cultural dynamics. Nonetheless, the depth of participant engagement and contextual focus provided valuable exploratory insights into multilingual communication and identity negotiation within this setting.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

This study set out to investigate the linguistic choices of students in a Ghanaian University (University of Media, Arts and Communication). Participants in focus group discussions (FGD) indicated their choices for a particular language in academic and non-academic learning environments proffering reasons for their choices.

4.1.1 Linguistic Choices in an Academic Learning Environment

Responding to the issue of language choice in a formal discourse environment on campus, participants first mentioned the likely communication settings which include lecture halls; durbars involving Student Representative Council (SRC) and the general student body; SRC general assembly meetings; student conferences and general conversation with lecturers outside lecture halls. In all these discourse settings, the respondents were unanimous in their language preference which is English Language.

Prestige of English

R1, Male, (21) had this to say:
'It's always been English, especially during lectures…there's no alternative because in the lecture hall English is the language the lecturer uses to teach…who are you to speak any other language?'

R3, Male, (20) shared his opinion thus:
'…Oh English language is always the number one…especially formal gatherings and lectures and stuff… I remember back in the days of SHS (Senior High School) during our elections manifesto, one guy expressed himself so well in English. He was so eloquent…am like wow! …Everyone clapped for him when he finished his presentation, even the teachers… he was given a standing ovation…'

R6, Female, (19) remarked:
'…yeah, for me I am always careful when answering questions from the lecturer or contributing to subject discussion during lectures. Of course we speak English during lectures… You Know, the lecturer is watching you, your mates are watching you and stuff… Every eye is on you, so I am very mindful of my language so I don't slip. You can't get it wrong! You got to prove that yeah you can flow well in English…. It's a good feeling'

R7, Female, (20) explained thus:
'…It's always a nice feeling when you're noticed for your eloquence in English language…. There was a time a female student approached me after class and asked me where I attended high school. I asked why and she was like… 'I like your confidence… you speak good English!'…We became friends later'

R9, Male, (20) responded:

…. In class if you 'gba' (student term for wrong English usage) you are finished! That becomes your nickname and it's not funny at all so for me I will not say anything in class unless the lecturer forces me, even that, I rehearse what I am going to say in my head quickly before I say anything (loud laughter).

R10, Female, (18) shared her experience thus:
…Anytime there is student durbar I do everything possible to contribute… It's a big platform to show what you've got…you know what I mean…lots of guys are there too…You speak your mind and you do it well… You want to show everyone that you can flow. It feels good, trust me, when friends know you can speak good English…'

R9, Female, (22) mentioned:
'… When you answer questions and you struggle with some English words, you try to fix in twi (a popular indigenous dialect) but when you do that, they'll laugh at you. So Charlie, you have to force and impress…'

R4, Female, (22) remarked:
'… there is very little chance of speaking Twi during lectures… It is the lecturer who controls the medium of instruction which is always English for sure…you can't even attempt to chip in bits of Twi in your answers because you will look odd and your friends might think you lack English vocabulary that's why you're switching to twi…it's unfortunate'

(R9), further made an interesting submission thus:
'…There is this particular lecturer who is fond of using Twi terms to kind of embarrass stubborn students or a dozing student during lectures just to create humour… Sometimes he will ask some students in the class to describe the behavior of the stubborn student in Twi. When this happens, we seize the opportunity to also show our Twi vocabs… this is the only time we can speak any local language whilst lectures is ongoing'
It is clear from the submissions of the participants that attitude towards English Language is high in formal communicative environment and that student interlocutors would do everything possible to impress in such circumstances. The responses of the participants depicted a good-feeling mentality anytime one spoke good English which was rewarded with positive reinforcement from friends, students and even teachers as evident in the excerpts from the responses:
'…Everyone clapped for him, even the teachers'
'…Every eye is on you…You can't get it wrong'
'…I like your confidence… you speak good English!'
'…I rehearse what I am going to say in my head quickly before I utter anything'
'…It feels good, trust me, when friends know you can speak good English'
'…you have to force and impress'

The above quotes show that students are driven by various motivation such as admiration, pride, and recognition to speak good English in formal communicative environment. This finding is consistent with Dewi and Setiadi's (2018) and Romaine's (2008) assertions that attitudes of users influence language choice and use as much as the status of the language among interlocutors in a particular society. The findings further reinforce Dako and Quarcoo's (2017) and Saah's (1986) submission that English enjoys great prestige in

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Ghana as it is seen as a language of power and security and that Ghanaians are proud of their competence in English which is highly regarded in Ghanaian societies. In terms of theoretical implications the excerpts illustrate how students' language choices in formal academic settings reflect accommodation strategies as espoused in Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007). It is evident here that participants' preference for English represents convergence, as they align with institutional and peer expectations to gain approval and project competence, while fear of ridicule for using Twi reflects the social penalties of divergence. From the perspective of Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999; 2005), speaking fluent English symbolizes identity inclusion and validation within the academic community, as seen in the pride and admiration expressed by peers and teachers, whereas the avoidance of indigenous languages signals identity differentiation linked to perceived low prestige. Overall, language use emerges as both a means of social accommodation and a marker of negotiated identity in Ghana's linguistically stratified university context.

4.1.2 Negative Attitude towards Indigenous Languages

Interestingly, within the same formal academic environment, students' attitude towards the indigenous languages is frowned upon as evident in excerpts of statement of some of the respondents thus:

'… when you answer questions and you struggle with some English words, you try to fix in twi but when you do that they'll laugh at you.'

'… there is very little chance of speaking Twi during lectures…you can't even attempt to chip in bits of Twi in your answers because you will look odd and your friends might think you lack English vocabulary…'

Temporarily, during lectures, Twi terms are used by both lecturer and students 'to kind of embarrass stubborn students or a dozing student during lectures just to create humour…'

These excerpts align with Adomako and Akrobotu (2023) who reported that pupils often developed unfavorable attitudes toward Ghanaian languages, influenced by parental expectations, school policies, and limited teaching resources. It further confirms Owu-Ewie and Edu-Buandoh's (2014) claim that attitude towards ethnic Ghanaian languages in formal educational settings is not favoured. However, it contradicts Twumasi's (2021) submission that students have positive attitudes towards the study of Ghanaian indigenous languages.

4.1.3 Linguistic Choices in a Semi-formal Academic Discourse Setting

Within semi-formal discourse environment on campus, participants identified circumstances that reflected reduced formality involving interlocutors. One of such issmall student-discussion groups to dilate on topics taught by lecturers. The other is tutorials, often led by the Teaching Assistant (TA) of the lecturer. Tas are usually recently graduated first degree students and so they bond very closely with the undergraduate students. Participants agreed that the choice of language in semi-formal environments depends on the composition of members of a particular group as evidenced in the extract of some of the participants:

R7, Female, (20) explained thus:

…for me I think the choice of language for discussion depends on who and who are involved in the group discussion… Sometimes you find yourself among 'sharks' (extremely brilliant

students) in the group and it's like they initiate the discussion. You know these guys speak well (good English) so you're forced to flow in your own way to measure up…'

R2, Male, (21) stated:
'… Sometimes the choice of language during group discussions depends on peculiar circumstances. When it becomes difficult explaining things in English, you switch to Twi because… yeah most of the guys identify with the Twi language and you yourself you can express yourself better to the understanding of everyone'

R3, Male, (20) intimated
…when you find yourself in a group of fun-loving guys… like boys-boys, though we use English for our discussions we sometimes switch to pidgin or Twi just to create a relaxed atmosphere … you know what I mean… It can't always be English, English, English… everyone feels free to contribute. No strict grammar stuff!'

R6, Female, (19) indicated:
'…I have been in two different types of groups during discussions. In the first group, we spoke English throughout because the members were serious but in the second we spoke Twi mixed with English because the group members were too relaxed'

Submissions made by participants in the extracts clearly suggest that the choice of language is determined by prevailing circumstances and group membership dynamics in a semi-formal communication environment. In some circumstances, 'sharks' in a group always initiate conversation in English and so to identify with them 'you're forced to flow in your own way to measure up'. Similarly, another respondent contends that peculiar circumstances like difficult topics can make group members switch from English language and identify with Twi because it helps to 'express yourself better to the understanding of everyone'. In the view of another respondent, an 'all-boys' 'fun-loving' group members oscillate between English, Pidgin and Twi during group studies simply because it engenders 'a relaxed atmosphere' which makes 'everyone feel free to contribute. In so doing they need not worry about committing grammatical errors but express themselves freely in a language that makes them feel relaxed. These findings resonate with (e.g., Astuti, 2021; Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014) findings whilst reinforcing the submissions of Apfelbaum and Meyer (2010), and Romaine, (2008) that multilingual individuals may choose to communicate in a specific language to compensate for the lack of proficiency in another language while in some circumstances, language choice may be motivated by the context or situation within which the multilingual individual finds himself or herself. In terms of theory, the excerpts demonstrate that students' language choices in semi-formal academic settings are guided by both accommodation and identity needs. Consistent with Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007), participants adjusted their speech to align with group dynamics—using English to signal seriousness and competence, and switching to Twi or Pidgin to create comfort and solidarity. From the perspective of Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999; 2005), these shifts reflect efforts toward identity inclusion within peer groups and identity differentiation in academically demanding contexts. Thus, code-switching functions as a strategic means of balancing social belonging and intellectual identity in semi-formal university discourse.

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4.1.4 Linguistic Choices in Non-academic Discourse Environment on Campus

Participants in the focus group discussion agreed that non-academic discourse environment involves communication that lie outside teaching and learning (lecture halls), official engagements with school authorities and formal student communication engagements. In effect, small group meetings (friends and peers) at the cafeteria, campus food joints, and relaxation joints etc. constitute non-academic discourse environment. The same question of language choice and the driving motivations were asked and participants gave varying responses.

The following extracts are the recurring responses given by the participants:

R4:

'…Oh outside lectures, I feel comfortable speaking the local dialect especially, twi because…ei why should I speak English after all the teaching and discussions in class… I need to feel free to express myself anyhow in a language my friends and I feel ok… Most of the time in such circumstances, we speak Twi because it offers us the opportunity to express ourselves freely. Who is going to mark our grammar here? (laughs)…'

R3, Male, (20), also remarked:

'…Yeah, when I am not attending lectures and I am relaxing with my buddies on campus, we go freestyle…like any common language apart from English. Usually, it is pidgin or Twi…We don't even make attempt to speak English because we want to feel each other's vibes…No, why should I speak 'good 'English in boys-boys movement? …You know what I mean...'

R1, Male, (21) also commented:

'…Me, I am part of the 'Yankees' on campus … two of our guys did high school in the US but me I did mine (SHS) in Ghana…but because I move with these guys so I try and force to slang like them…you know what I mean ,.. yeah'

R6, Female, (19) responded thus:

'…. Yeah, it depends… I speak Twi with my friends outside lectures If we are from different ethnic background…but even here when your Twi is not too good you have to try else, they'll laugh at you…But if I move with friends from my ethnic background we speak our language thus Ga…'

R8, Female, (19) indicated:

'… Sometimes even in informal situations you are forced to speak English particularly when moving with ladies who cannot flow well in Twi especially some of my friends from the north (northern part of Ghana)… For such ladies you are forced to speak English so they feel part of the conversation'

It is apparent from the responses of the participants that communication setting, group membership dynamics, communication accommodation as well as lack of proficiency in the language are major determinants in language choice for communication as reflected in the extracts below:

'Why should I speak good English in boys-boys movement?

'I speak Twi with my friends outside lectures If we are from different ethnic background… But if I move with friends from my ethnic background we speak our language thus Ga…'

'…but because I move with these guys so I try and force to slang like them.'

These submissions by the participants confirm Holmes (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) studies which proffer reasons for language choice in a multilingual speech community which include situations and settings ; participants in interactions- such as age, gender, occupation, socioeconomic status, and the conversational topic. . In relation to theory, the responses show that in non-academic settings, students' language choices reflect both social accommodation and identity affirmation. Consistent with Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007), participants diverged from the formal English norm and converged toward Twi, Ga, or Pidgin to build solidarity and ease interaction. From the lens of Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999; 2005), such shifts signify identity inclusion, as students align with peer groups to express belonging and authenticity. Occasional switches to English to include non–Twi-speaking peers further demonstrate accommodation for mutual understanding. Overall, informal language use functions as a marker of group identity and relational harmony.

4.2 Discussions

The responses of the participants in this study have so far established that several factors account for linguistic choices and preferences of students in academic and non-academic multilingual discourse environments. First, language choice may be influenced by peculiar situations or the context of situations in which the interlocutor may have to adopt a particular language in order to accommodate members of the group in a discourse situation as espoused by Coulmas (2013) who averred that in a multilingual communication environments, individuals adapt their linguistic repertoire to new situations and build their language for specific purpose. Secondly, this study has proved that language choice is influenced by attitude of the interlocutors towards the target language as evidenced in the arguments of Dewi and Setiadi (2018) and Owu-Ewie and Edu-Buandoh (2014) to the effect that positive language attitude promotes encouragement to the language use whilst negative attitude becomes a disincentive towards the choice and use of a language. These conclusions were evident in the present study where participants expressed satisfaction and feel-good mentality towards English language whilst trivializing the speaking of the indigenous Ghanaian languages in the academic discourse environment. Again, instances of interlocutors linguistically accommodating others in a discourse engagement is consistent with Apfelbaum and Meyer (2010), Romaine, (2008) submissions that multilingual individuals may choose to communicate in a specific language to compensate for the lack of proficiency in another language. It further reinforces McWhorter (2014) and Llamas and Watt's (2010) arguments that Individuals and groups may shift or re-negotiate their identities to suit prevailing standards to feel recognized and accepted in their various communities. However, preference for indigenous languages particularly Asante Twi in informal communication environment on campuses is very much paramount as evident in the responses of the participants. All in all, language choice in group communication is dependent on several factors including attitude, setting of the discourse environment, and group membership dynamics.

5. Conclusion

This study has established three influencing factors that affect language choice in a multilingual academic discourse environment, and include: attitude towards the language, discourse setting and group membership dynamics. These conclusions make the two theories for the study even more relevant in that Ting-Toomey's (1999; 2005) argumentation

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on identity negotiation highlights the dynamics of people's group membership where individuals tend to feel included when their desired group membership identities are positively endorsed but may experience identity differentiation when their group membership is stigmatized. The theory has implications on linguistic choices of members in multilingual speech communities. Giles and Ogay's (1997) communication accommodation theory focuses on the notion that interlocutors adjust and adapt to each other for a successful social interaction. Upon entering a communicative encounter, people begin to synchronize aspects of their verbal and nonverbal behavior to accommodate views during interaction. The findings of this study thus corroborate several previous studies establishing the fact that linguistic choices in any communication environment are influenced by attitude towards a particular language. However, the study makes specific claims that, apart from language attitude, communication setting and group membership dynamics also influence the choice of language as interlocutors negotiate and re-negotiate their identities to suit prevailing standards in order to feel recognized and accepted in their various communities (Llamas & Watt 2010; McWhorter 2014).

In essence, this study establishes that in formal academic communication environments like lectures, students prefer to speak English language because it comes with prestige and makes the interlocutor feels 'respected'. In semi-formal communication environments like study groups, students oscillate between languages from English to 'Pidgin' or 'Twi' depending on the dynamics of group membership. Finally, in informal non-academic communication environment such as the cafeteria, campus food joints, and other student hangouts, students prefer communicating in the indigenous languages or 'pidgin' English. On rare occasions do students speak Standard English in informal circumstances on campus or choose to speak indigenous languages in formal academic setting. This study extends Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) by showing how convergence, divergence, and identity negotiation manifest differently across formal, semi-formal, and non-academic interactions in a multilingual university context. It expands both theories beyond their traditional Western focus, revealing how language prestige, peer dynamics, and contextual shifts shape accommodation and identity performances in Ghanaian higher education. Further studies could adopt survey methods to corroborate the findings of this qualitative study. The study has implications on linguistic attitude and choices of individuals towards language in other institutions and organizations in professional settings.

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