

Language Accommodation Strategies in Multilingual Settings: A Case of Kibuye Market, Kisumu County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the language accommodation strategies used by buyers and sellers in the multilingual environment of Kibuye Market in Kisumu County, Kenya. The market brings together speakers of Dholuo, Kiswahili, English, and other Kenyan local languages, making linguistic flexibility essential for effective trade and social interaction. Guided by Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1971), the study focused on how market participants adjust their language choices during transactions. Data were collected through ethnographic observations, structured interviews, and questionnaires involving 24 participants, comprising 12 buyers and 12 sellers. The findings showed that sellers and buyers frequently employ code-switching, use Kiswahili as a common lingua franca, adapt their language to match the customer's linguistic background, and use tags such as kinship, praise, and honorific expressions to create rapport. Humor and relational terms were also commonly used to ease interactions and strengthen social bonds. These strategies enhance mutual understanding, reduce communication barriers, and facilitate smoother business transactions in the multilingual marketplace. The study concludes that linguistic accommodation is a practical and effective communication tool that supports both interpersonal relations and commercial success among market participants in Kibuye Market.

Keywords: language accommodation, multilingualism, code-switching, Kiswahili, buyers, sellers, Kibuye Market.

BACKGROUND

Multilingual interaction is central to trade in Kibuye Market, where buyers and sellers from diverse linguistic backgrounds communicate using Dholuo, Kiswahili, Luhya, Ekegusii, English, and other languages. To facilitate understanding and successful transactions, participants employ language accommodation strategies such as the use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca for linguistic accommodation, code-switching, linguistic adaptation, lexical borrowing, use of humor and friendly banter as a language accommodation strategy, use of tags; kinship tags, praise tags and honorific tags to accommodate diverse clienteles. Kiswahili often functions as a lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication, while indigenous languages are used to build familiarity and trust, demonstrating how linguistic adaptation supports effective communication and smooth commercial interaction.

Materials and Methods: The study used a mixed-method design to describe language accommodation strategies among buyers and sellers in Kibuye Market, Kisumu County. Twenty-four participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds were selected through purposive and stratified random sampling. Data were collected through participant observation, questionnaires, audio recordings, and semi-structured interviews to capture multilingual transactional interactions. Thematic analysis and frequency summaries were used to identify strategies such as code-switching, use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca, linguistic adaptation, use of humor and friendly banter, and use of tags.

Results: The study found that buyers and sellers in Kibuye Market employ several deliberate language accommodation strategies to communicate effectively in a multilingual trading environment. Kiswahili emerged as the dominant lingua franca, enabling interaction across ethnic groups and reducing communication

barriers. Participants also frequently used code-switching between Kiswahili, Dholuo, Luhya, Ekegusii, English, and Sheng to enhance understanding, create rapport, and support successful bargaining. Linguistic adaptation involved adjusting pronunciation, tone, vocabulary, and speech speed to suit interlocutors' linguistic abilities. Lexical borrowing was used for greetings, price negotiations, and culturally meaningful expressions. Humor, praise terms, honorifics, and kinship expressions further promoted friendliness, inclusion, and smoother market interactions.

INTRODUCTION

In many locations around the world, markets are a place where people speak multiple languages, and where individuals from the different linguistic communities engage with each other on a daily basis as they conduct their business. In these settings, good communication is critical to the facilitation of trade, establishment of trust and successful deals. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1971) suggests that speakers modify their language and communication style in order to communicate with their audience and build a relationship. This adjustment is more critical in the multilingual commercial environment, like Kibuye Market in Kisumu County, Kenya. Kibuye Market is one of the busiest commercial centers in western Kenya, to the extent that it attracts buyers and sellers from various ethnic and linguistic groups. Therefore, there is a complex multilingual environment in the interaction between the traders who speak Luo, Kiswahili, Luhya, Kisii, Kikuyu, English and other languages which calls for constant linguistic adaptation. There have been several studies that have identified some common language accommodation strategies that are used in multilingual settings. Auer (1984) emphasizes two strategies that allow speakers to utilize more than one language in the same interaction: code switching and translanguaging. To bridge language barriers, the process of simplification, repetition and the use of easily understood expressions are often used, as mentioned by Pavlenko (2002). Other scholars have focused on convergence, which occurs when the speaker adapts his or her output to sound more like the other person in the conversation in pronunciation, vocabulary, or language in a way that is intended to facilitate cooperation and minimize social distance.

Worldwide research has predominantly focused on language accommodation within formal settings like education, the workplace, health care, and professional institutions. In Africa, research on language accommodation in multilingual societies has been conducted, but most of the work has been on the formal/institutional level. The studies conducted in Kenya have focused on the use of language in schools, public offices, courts and urban language shift, while very little work has been done on informal economic environment like open air markets. The multilingual context within which Kenya's accommodation practices are understood is helpful in the understanding of the accommodation practices in Kibuye market. There are over forty native languages in Kenya; the majority are in the Bantu and Nilotic language families with a few in the Cushitic family. The country uses a triglossic system, that is, it uses three languages: indigenous languages, Kiswahili and English. Kiswahili is the national language and is a widely-used lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication, particularly in urban and commercial environment where strangers come in contact. English is used more often for education, administration and formal communication, and is the official language, while indigenous languages are used more often for family and community life.

Research on multilingualism in commercial transactions in Kenya suggests that traders make strategic choices in their language selection to meet specific objectives. Sometimes Kiswahili is employed to build unity and promote communication between different ethnic groups, while indigenous languages may be used to build familiarity and trust with the same ethnic group. English is sometimes used for prestige and/or with well-educated customers. Researchers have also demonstrated how market participants construct their identity, social relations and transactional success as they construct their language use. In spite of these findings, research regarding the language accommodation strategies that are carried out during routine market exchanges between buyers and sellers is still limited. Little is known, however, about the use of strategies such as code switching, convergence, repeating, simplifying, joking, using relational terms or other means of linguistic adaptation that participants at Kibuye Market employ to overcome communication problems to ensure smooth business interactions. These strategies are significant because they are not only vital for effective communication, but they also play a role in customer satisfaction, social cohesion and the successful economic exchange in multilingual markets like Kibuye Market, Kisumu County.

Study Problem

Kibuye Market, Kisumu County is a multilingual commercial hub where people from various linguistic backgrounds transact business on a daily basis. Traders will often use different languages, such as Dholuo, Kiswahili, Luhya, Kuria, Nandi and other languages according to the customer. The language adjustments indicate the use of strategies of accommodation that are designed to enhance communication and to enable effective business communication. But not much research has been dedicated to the way these strategies work in the informal market. It is not yet well documented how buyers and sellers adapt their language use for their interlocutors. The study thus aimed to describe the language accommodation strategies used by the buyers and sellers in the Kibuye market, Kisumu County, Kenya in light of Communication Accommodation Theory.

Objectives of this Study

This study sought to address the following objective;

To describe the language accommodation strategies utilized by buyers and sellers of Kibuye Market of Kisumu County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study explores the language accommodation strategies of the buyers and sellers in Kibuye Market of Kisumu County, Kenya, a multilingual market in which the users of Dholuo, Kiswahili, English and other Kenyan languages engage in everyday interactions. Research on language accommodation in educational settings, workplace, and in bilingual communities has been conducted, but research on the strategies being used in Kenyan marketplace is limited. The study follows the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as proposed by Giles (1971) on how the speaker adjusts his/her communication in order to achieve effective interaction, social approval, and mutual understanding. Convergence was one of the biggest accommodation approaches found in the literature. Convergence is the process whereby speakers change their language, pronunciation, speech rate or other communicative styles to make themselves more similar to the interlocutor(s) (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Studies have demonstrated that convergence is frequently employed to promote understanding, to create a rapport, and to allow for more fluid communication. Where there are multiple languages in a marketplace, buyers and sellers can come together by switching languages from their home language to the language understood by the other party. For instance, a trader speaking a Luo language may switch to a Kuria language for conversation with a customer who speaks a Kuria language and a customer speaking a Kiswahili language may communicate with a trader who speaks a Kiswahili language.

There are two types of convergence: downward convergence and upward convergence. Downward convergence occurs when a speaker simplifies their speech to accommodate a listener with lower status or language proficiency. This often occurs when individuals from higher social strata modify their language to match that of someone from a lower socioeconomic background (Chishiba & Mvule, 2018). In contrast, upward convergence involves a speaker from a lower socioeconomic background modifying aspects of their speech to align with those characteristics of higher socioeconomic status individuals. Convergences can be seen in Kibuye Market when the language of the traders is adjusted to the customers who don't speak Dholuo, and when the customers use Kiswahili or English words that are linked with commercial communication in general. These changes serve to lower the barriers in communication, to make them more familiar, and to facilitate better transaction outcomes.

In the literature, another important strategy mentioned is code switching. Code switching is the switching of two or more languages in the same conversation and even in the same sentence (Ahmad et al., 2023). In multilingual societies like Kenya bilingual and multilingual speakers often switch languages depending on the interlocutor, the language content and the interspeaker relationship. Myers-Scotton states that the multilingual speaker rarely simply alternates between two languages in interaction, but rather switches flexibly between the linguistic codes at his disposal to meet communicative needs. In this study there are three categories of code switching which are relevant. Tag switching is when a word or short phrase is taken from one language and inserted into another language. Inter-sentential code switching is the switching of languages between sentences

and clauses. Intra-sentential code switching is within a single sentence and is the most complex. Research of commercial interactions has revealed that the use of code-switching may be strategic to attract customers, negotiate prices, express solidarity and keep social relations. In Kibuye Market, a speaker may start conversation in Dholuo, and incorporate Kiswahili or other local languages during the process of price negotiation to reduce social distance.

Other related forms of accommodation discussed in the literature include translanguaging, simplification, and repetition. Auer (1984) noted that multilingual traders tend to mix linguistic elements of various languages in order to communicate with different customers. Pavlenko (2002) revealed that repetition and simplification of language could be used to fill gaps in language and to ensure important information is understood. Sellers might repeat prices in Dholuo and Kiswahili in a crowded market, and use shorter sentences, or gestures and words together to make it easier for the buyer to understand. These practices help all participants to communicate despite language differences. Another important social function of code switching/crossing and another cultural importance is that of code mixing. They can express familiarity, solidarity, group membership or distance, depending on the context. In the business world, for instance, a trader can change to the customer's language to make the environment more comfortable and build trust, whereas by speaking the trader's language, a customer can get a better price, or show respect. These linguistic decisions are not arbitrary, but are influenced by the multilingual nature of the market and the need to communicate effectively.

Kibuye Market has been chosen because of its multicultural nature, which makes it suitable for the study of these strategies. There are daily opportunities for language choice and accommodation as traders and customers from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds gather there. The study is based on Communication Accommodation Theory, which is used to identify buying and selling communicative practices that are considered adaptive, such as convergence, code-switching and simplification, among others. The knowledge of these strategies helps shed light on the role linguistic diversity plays in communication, social relations and commercial activities in Kibuye Market, which adds to the body of knowledge on language accommodation in multilingual Kenyan marketplaces.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study used a mixed method research design which was used to describe the language accommodation strategy which the buyers and sellers used in Kibuye market, Kisumu County. The design was mixed that included both qualitative and quantitative methods to get a complete picture of the way multilingual interactions take place in the market. The qualitative aspect allowed the researcher to observe the natural ways in which the participants conversed and their experiences, whereas the quantitative aspect allowed the researcher to obtain structured information relating to the degree and distribution of accommodation strategies by the market actors. The appropriateness of the use of mixed methods was justified as language accommodation is a social phenomenon and communicative practice that demands detailed contextual interpretation and systematic comparison of the responses from the different participants.

The study was carried out in Kibuye market of Kisumu Central Sub-County in Kisumu County in Kenya. The Kisumu town's Kibuye market is the busiest and biggest market serving traders and customers from various ethnic and language groups such as Luo, Luhya, Kisii, Kalenjin and others. The city is fringed by several high-density estates like Tom Mboya, Kaloleni, Kondele, Shaurimoyo and Polyview, adding to the cosmopolitan nature of the market. This diversity makes it a suitable context in which to study the LAS of speakers in order to facilitate communication in the context of commercial transactions.

Purposive and stratified random sampling were used in selecting participants on the basis of their first-hand experiences in multilingual market interactions. To select representatives of the market, purposeful sampling was initially employed to find key informants such as those market administrators and long-standing traders who had insight into communication dynamics in the market. Stratified random sampling was subsequently employed to identify buyers and sellers from various areas of the market to provide diversity for age, gender, education and ethnicity.

A total of 24 participants were involved, 12 buyers and 12 sellers. Equal representation was critical as

language accommodation takes place during interaction between both groups of buyers and sellers. The sellers were 6 male and 6 female and the buyers were 6 male and 6 female. Participants were from the Luo, Luhya, Kisii and Kalenjin communities, which is the multilingual nature of Kibuye Market. The educational level varied from no education to the tertiary level, thereby reflecting the accommodation of all different levels of literacy. Participants also came from various age groups to ensure comparisons of potential age differences in language flexibility and communication preferences.

The study population comprised all the active players in Kibuye Market engaged in business activities. These comprised stall owners, vendors and hawkers, as well as regular buyers who deal with traders on a frequent basis. The main language used for market transactions in the study was Dholuo, Kiswahili and English with other unmentioned languages including Luhya, Kisii and Kalenjin. This population was selected as appropriate because it being made up of the real speakers who participated in multilingual communication in the marketplace.

A sample of 24 participants (12 sellers and 12 buyers) was used. The study was qualitative and used a case study orientation, which gave emphasis to the depth of the information presented rather than the large numbers of data presented, and this size was determined adequate. The chosen participants gave comprehensive and detailed information about the communication that took place during the market. Further, at least six transactional conversations were analyzed to look for common accommodation patterns in various communicative contexts. Therefore, the sample size was not considered small for determining the key language accommodation strategies used by buyers and sellers.

The research tools employed were participant observation, questionnaire, audio recording and semi-structured interviews. These methods allowed the researcher to collect both naturally-occurring conversational data and participants' explanations of their language choices. Participant observation was done by the researcher by immersing and observing in the market environment the natural interactions that took place between the buyers and sellers. This approach enabled identification of the use of code switching, repetition, simplification of expressions, polite forms, and changing languages (Dholuo, Kiswahili, and others) depending on the interlocutor. Observational notes were systematically recorded to gain insights into language use in real transactional contexts. The study was based on familiarity with the speech community to reduce the observer's paradox and to ensure that the participants spoke as naturally as possible.

Structured and comparable information was collected from all participants through the questionnaires. The instrument included both open and closed questions on the language choice, communication strategies and patterns of interaction in the market. The questionnaires enabled the participants to indicate the use of accommodation strategies like code switching, convergence towards a customer's language, use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca, repetition, clarification and even simplification of speech. The questionnaire also collected background data which provided context for participants' communication practices.

Audio recording was a key source of information in the research since it recorded conversations between buyers and sellers as they carried out their normal business. The talk was recorded for research purposes and the conversations were transcribed. A minimum of six transactional conversations were analyzed. The researcher noted on these recordings the various accommodation strategies that were used, such as code switching between Dholuo and Kiswahili, convergence towards the customer's preferred language, repetition of key information, simplification of vocabulary and using indigenous languages in order to accommodate the customer and make the transaction a success.

In a bid to get detailed explanations of buyers' and sellers' language choices and experiences in communication, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both buyers and sellers. The interviews provided an opportunity to the participants to explain how they adapt their speech when communicating with individuals from various linguistic backgrounds, the reasons for selecting specific languages under specific circumstances, and which strategies they use as effective in making their interlocutors understand them and thus sustain good business relations. The flexibility of the interviews allowed the researcher to dig deeper into issues that arose and to elicit in-depth qualitative information on language accommodation practices.

Data obtained from observations, audio recordings, questionnaires, and interviews were analyzed thematically.

The analysis focused on identifying and describing the language accommodation strategies used in Kibuye Market. Particular attention was given to strategies such as code-switching, use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca, convergence toward an interlocutor's language, repetition, simplification of expressions, and shifts between indigenous languages during transactions. Questionnaire responses were also summarized using frequencies and percentages. Each participant's response indicating the use of a particular strategy was counted as one instance, and the frequencies for buyers and sellers were combined to determine the overall occurrence of each strategy. This approach enabled the researcher to establish the extent to which different accommodation strategies were used across the two groups. Findings were presented through descriptive narratives supported by frequency summaries in order to provide a clear account of the language accommodation strategies utilized by buyers and sellers in Kibuye Market.

A pilot study was conducted before the main data collection exercise in order to test the research instruments and assess the feasibility of the study within a market setting. Preliminary interviews with a small number of buyers and sellers helped determine whether multilingual interactions were sufficiently common and whether the instruments could effectively capture accommodation strategies. The pilot study led to refinement of the questionnaires, interview guides, and observation procedures, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the main study.

The study adhered to established research ethical guidelines. Approval was obtained from the relevant university authorities, and a research permit was secured from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, participants were free to withdraw at any stage, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. These measures ensured that the study was conducted in a responsible and ethical manner while protecting the rights and privacy of all participants.

RESULT

Language Accommodation Strategies Utilized by Buyers and Sellers in Kibuye Market

This section addresses the objective "to describe language accommodation strategies utilized by buyers and sellers of Kibuye Market, Kisumu County, Kenya." The findings were derived from questionnaires, interviews, participant observation, and recorded transactional conversations. The questionnaires guided participants to respond to issues related to language choice, communication strategies and interaction patterns. Audio recording was the main data source for this study. Conversations were recorded and subjected to analysis. Interviews were appropriate for detailed explanations opinions regarding language accommodation strategies.

In order to address this objective, "to describe language accommodation strategies utilized by buyers and sellers of Kibuye Market, Kisumu County, Kenya," responses from 24 participants comprising of 12 buyers and 12 sellers were analyzed to identify various strategies employed during market interactions. Participants were asked whether they used specific language accommodation strategies such as code-switching, linguistic adaptation, and use of lingua franca. The frequencies of each reported strategy were then computed. Data collected were analyzed thematically. Themes related to language accommodation strategies such as Kiswahili as a lingua franca for linguistic accommodation, code-switching, linguistic adaptation and lexical borrowing were identified and interpreted. Findings were presented using descriptive analysis.

The analysis focused on the communicative practices that enable traders and customers from diverse linguistic backgrounds to interact effectively in the multilingual environment of Kibuye Market. The study established that accommodation strategies are not random linguistic choices; rather, they are deliberate communicative adjustments intended to enhance mutual understanding, strengthen social relations, facilitate negotiation, and improve commercial outcomes. The major strategies identified from questionnaires, interviews and participant observation were the use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca, code-switching, linguistic adaptation, and lexical borrowing. Observation further revealed the use of humor and friendly banter, use of tags such as praise tags, honorifics tags, and kinship tags as supplementary accommodative devices that promote inclusion and rapport during market interactions.

One of the questions that the respondents were to respond to from both questionnaire and interview was, ‘*what language accommodation strategies do you use to ensure effective communication?*’ Responses showed the use of Kiswahili as a lingua franca for linguistic accommodation, code-switching, lexical borrowing and linguistic adaptation as shown in Table 1 below

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Language Accommodation Strategies Used by Sellers and Buyers of Kibuye Market (N=24)

Language Accommodation Strategy	Sellers (n=12)	Buyers (n=12)	Total Frequency (N=24)	Percentage (%)
Kiswahili as a lingua franca	11	11	22	91.7
Code-switching	10	9	19	79.2
Linguistic adaptation	6	7	13	54.2
Lexical borrowing	5	4	9	37.5

(Note-Frequency represent the number of participants who reported a particular language accommodation strategy. Percentages were calculated based on the total sample of 24 participants. N =total sample; n =subgroup sample. Percentages were calculated by dividing the frequency of participants reporting each language accommodation strategy by the total number sample size ($N=24$) and multiplying with 100. Participants could report more than one strategy).

The data in Table 1 show that Kiswahili as a lingua franca for linguistic accommodation was the most dominant accommodation strategy, reported by 22 out of 24 participants (91.7%). This indicates that Kiswahili serves as the principal shared language through which buyers and sellers bridge ethnic and linguistic diversity in Kibuye Market. Both sellers and buyers explained that they usually begin conversations in Kiswahili before switching to Dholuo or another local language if they discover that the interlocutor belongs to a particular ethnic community. Sellers described Kiswahili as the language that attracts customers, facilitates bargaining, and enables efficient communication with non-local buyers. Buyers similarly indicated that Kiswahili is preferred because it is understood by the majority of people in the market. The findings therefore establish Kiswahili as a transactional lingua franca that functions simultaneously as a social bridge and an economic resource. Its use minimizes communication barriers, promotes inclusivity, enhances trust between traders and customers, and supports successful commercial exchange.

Interview responses reinforced the centrality of Kiswahili in multilingual accommodation. Sellers repeatedly stated that although Dholuo is their mother tongue, they use Kiswahili with most customers because the market attracts people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Buyers likewise reported that they rely on Kiswahili whenever they are uncertain about the seller’s ethnic identity or linguistic competence. The study observed that Kiswahili often creates a neutral communicative space in which participants temporarily suspend ethnic boundaries in order to conduct business smoothly. However, the accommodation process remains flexible because speakers frequently shift to Dholuo, Luhya, Ekegusii, or Sheng’ whenever doing so increases comprehension or interpersonal closeness. This demonstrates that accommodation in Kibuye Market is dynamic and responsive to the immediate communicative context rather than fixed to a single language. The study also examined the use of other languages besides Kiswahili in accommodating diverse interlocutors. Participants were allowed to select more than one language, and the findings are summarized below.

Table 2: Buyers’ and Sellers’ Preference for Other Languages Used to Accommodate Diverse Marketers

Language	Buyers (n=12)	% Buyers	Sellers (n=12)	% Sellers
Dholuo	9	75.0	10	83.3
Luhya	4	33.3	5	41.7
English	3	25.0	4	33.3

Ekegusii	3	25.0	4	33.3
Kuria	2	16.7	2	16.7

(Note: percentages were calculated by dividing the frequency of participants reporting use of each language by respective subgroup total ($n=12$) and multiplying by 100. For example, 10 out of 12 sellers reported using Dholuo; therefore, the percentage was calculated as $10 \text{ divides by } 12 \times 100$. Participants could report using more than one language. n = number of participants in each group)

Table 2 indicates that Dholuo was the most preferred indigenous language among both buyers and sellers, with 75% of buyers and 83.3% of sellers reporting its use. This is unsurprising given that Kibuye Market is located within a predominantly Luo-speaking region. Sellers often switched to Dholuo when they recognized that a customer was Luo, while buyers used Dholuo when interacting with Luo traders because it created familiarity and eased negotiation. The findings show that local ethnic languages remain important accommodation resources even in a market where Kiswahili dominates. Dholuo was particularly associated with solidarity, trust, and customer attraction, suggesting that speaking the customer's ethnic language can provide both social and economic advantages.

Luhya emerged as the second most preferred indigenous language. Its use reflects the significant presence of Luhya-speaking traders and customers in Kisumu due to migration, employment, and trade. Sellers who knew Luhya occasionally switched to it in order to establish rapport with Luhya-speaking customers and facilitate smoother interaction. English was used less frequently because market transactions are generally informal; however, it remained significant among educated participants, wholesalers, and younger speakers dealing with customers from diverse educational backgrounds. English was often associated with professionalism and communicative efficiency, although some buyers avoided it during bargaining because it could signal higher socioeconomic status. Ekegusii was used by Kisii participants to reinforce ethnic closeness and mutual trust, while Kuria appeared less frequently due to the smaller Kuria-speaking population in the market. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that accommodation practices in Kibuye Market involve strategic movement between a shared lingua franca and various ethnic languages depending on the interlocutor's identity and communicative needs.

As indicate in Table 1, the second major accommodation strategy identified in the study was code-switching, which was reported by 19 out of 24 participants (79.2%). Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages within the same interaction. Both buyers and sellers indicated that they frequently shift between Kiswahili, Dholuo, Luhya, Ekegusii, and Sheng' or any other local language in order to accommodate diverse clienteles. The practice was observed in natural market conversations where participants began in one language and then changed to another after receiving cues about the interlocutor's linguistic competence or ethnic background. Sellers often started with Kiswahili and shifted to Dholuo if the buyer appeared more comfortable in Dholuo, while buyers similarly switched to Kiswahili whenever a seller did not understand their initial language choice. The multilingual repertoire of Kibuye Market therefore encourages fluid movement across languages rather than rigid adherence to a single code as was observed in the conversation 1 below captured between a multilingual seller (speaks Dholuo, Kiswahili, and Sheng') and a monolingual customer who speaks only Kiswahili.

Conversation 1

Customer: Habari, naeza pata viatu black kwa bei mzuri? (Hello, can I get black shoes at a fair price?)

Seller: (Starts in Kiswahili, then subtly switches to Dholuo) Karibu sana. Viatu ziko, **ber to oteгно. Ne ... in gi adi owadwa.** (Welcome. Shoes are available. Smart and of good quality. How much do you have my brother?)

Customer: (not understanding the Dholuo phrase, respond in Kiswahili): Sijaelewa vizuri. Hii hapa ni ngapi? (Sorry, I did not understand that well. How much is this?)

Seller:(quickly adapts) Samahani. Hii ni fifteen hundred **kende.** (Sorry. That is fifteen hundred only)

Customer: Ehh Customer. Hapana. (Ehh customer. No!)

Seller: Uko na ngapi. (*How much do you have?*)

Buyer: Niko na mia nane. (*I have Ksh.800*)

The seller responds warmly in Kiswahili but subtly code-switches by introducing a Dholuo phrase— “*ber to tegno (good and durable), in ga di owadwa (how much do you have my brother?), (... kende (...only),* —which reflects ethnic identity and perhaps a sense of cultural pride. This moment of code-switching signals the seller’s bilingual ability and social identity, but it also presents a linguistic barrier as the customer, unfamiliar with Dholuo, expresses confusion and seeks clarification in Kiswahili.

Recognizing the confusion, the seller quickly adapts by abandoning Dholuo altogether and simplifying the language to ensure clarity and understanding. This shift demonstrates linguistic convergence where seller make effort to reduce social distance and increase communicative alignment, ultimately fostering a sense of familiarity and mutual understanding in line with Similarity Attraction principle, a core concept in CAT. By switching fully back to Kiswahili and using simplified, transactional language—“*fifteen hundred kende*”—the seller reduces social and linguistic distance, thereby facilitating rapport and successful negotiation. Linguistic convergence is a strategy where individuals adjust their communicative behaviors, to align more closely with the behavior of their conversation partner; a speaker selecting a language similar to that of their interlocutor (Giles & Coupland, 1991). As seen is conversation 1 above.

Analysis of interview responses revealed four dominant reasons for code-switching: enhancing mutual understanding, creating interpersonal closeness, expressing social identity, and facilitating successful commercial interaction. Participants explained that they switch languages whenever they notice signs of misunderstanding or communicative difficulty as seen in conversation 1. For example, sellers reported beginning conversations in Kiswahili and then introducing Dholuo or Sheng’ if the customer seemed confused, while buyers indicated that they change languages whenever the seller fails to understand properly. Such adjustments enable conversations to proceed smoothly and reduce the likelihood of transactional failure. Code-switching therefore functions as a practical mechanism for maintaining communicative clarity in a highly diverse marketplace.

Code-switching was also used to create interpersonal closeness and familiarity. Sellers stated that they feel more connected to customers when they share a local language, and buyers similarly preferred using a familiar ethnic language whenever possible because it created a friendly atmosphere. Switching to Dholuo, Ekegusii, or Luhya often signaled solidarity and reduced social distance between the participants. In addition, language alternation served as a way of negotiating social identity. Kiswahili was used to construct a shared marketplace identity that transcended ethnic boundaries, whereas indigenous languages were employed to emphasize common ethnic membership when such similarity was recognized. The findings therefore show that code-switching in Kibuye Market is simultaneously functional, relational, and symbolic.

The specific motivations for code-switching are summarized in the following table.

Table 3: Buyers’ and Sellers’ Reasons for Code-Switching as a Language Accommodation Strategy (N=24)

Reason	Buyers (n=12)	% Buyers	Sellers (n=12)	% Sellers
Negotiating fair price	10	83.3	8	66.7
Clarity / Being understood	8	66.7	11	91.7
Politeness and rapport	6	50.0	7	58.3
Faster social connection	9	75.0	5	41.7
Efficiency in communication	8	66.7	6	50.0
Limited vocabulary	6	50.0	3	25.0

(*N=the total number of participants (N=24 participants) n= number of participants per subgroup (n=12 buyers and n=12 sellers). Percentages derived as indicated for Table 1 and 2)*

Table 3 shows that clarity and being understood was the most dominant reason for code-switching among sellers, reported by 91.7% of them. Because sellers interact with constantly changing customers, they were more proactive in adjusting their language choices to avoid misunderstanding and secure successful transactions. Negotiating fair prices was particularly important for buyers, with 83.3% identifying it as a reason for switching languages. Buyers often felt that bargaining was easier and more effective when conducted in a familiar language. Faster social connection was also highly significant, especially among buyers who used local languages or Sheng to establish rapport quickly with sellers. Other reasons included efficiency in communication, politeness and rapport, and compensating for limited vocabulary in one language. These findings demonstrate that code-switching is driven by both social motivations (solidarity, politeness, rapport) and economic motivations (successful bargaining, customer retention, and efficient transactions).

A third major strategy was linguistic adaptation, reported by 13 participants (54.2%). Linguistic adaptation involved modifying pronunciation, speech style, tone, vocabulary choice, speaking speed, or sentence structure in order to suit the communicative needs of interlocutors from different linguistic backgrounds. The study found that accommodation in Kibuye Market extends beyond switching languages; speakers also reshape how they speak within a language. Sellers slowed down their speech when addressing non-local customers, simplified vocabulary when interacting with less educated buyers, and adjusted their tone to appear friendlier and more approachable. Buyers similarly modified their speech style depending on the seller's perceived linguistic competence and social background.

One particularly important form of linguistic adaptation was accent mobility; whereby non-Luo speakers adjusted their pronunciation to resemble Dholuo phonological patterns. Accent mobility refers to individual's ability to adjust their accent or pronunciation, either consciously or unconsciously. Participant observation showed that speakers sometimes lengthened vowels, altered consonant articulation, or adopted Luo-like intonation when addressing Luo customers. These modifications were not necessarily attempts to become fluent Dholuo speakers; rather, they functioned as symbolic gestures of friendliness, cultural sensitivity, and willingness to accommodate the customer's linguistic identity. Sellers believed that sounding closer to the customer's speech style helped build rapport, increase customer comfort, and improve the likelihood of making a sale. Accent adaptation therefore emerged as an important phonological dimension of accommodation in multilingual market interaction. During participant observation, the following were noted as indicated in Table 4 below regarding accent modification.

Table 4: Non-Luo Accent Modification as a Linguistic Accommodation Strategy

Original words/phrase	Modified version	Vowel change (Orthographic & phonological)	Phonological strategy
R <u>u</u> oth (King)	R <u>w</u> ooth	/uo/ ➡ /o:/ Ruoth ➡ Rwooth	Prolonging the vowel
Nyath <u>i</u> na (my child)	Nyathi <u>i</u> na or nyath <u>h</u> na	/i/ ➡ /i:/ Nyathina ➡ Nyathiina or drop /i/ from the original word (nyathina to nyathna)	Lengthening of vowels or omission of some sounds in the pronunciation
B <u>e</u> r (Hello)	B <u>e</u> rr	/e/ retained. /r/ flapped	Flapping 'r'
<u>P</u> esa adi? (how much?)	<u>B</u> esa adii?	/p/ ➡ /b/ <u>p</u> esa ➡ <u>b</u> esa lengthening /i:/ in adi ➡ adii	Voice the unvoiced consonant (pesa-money) to besa.
Sibu <u>o</u> r (Lion)	Sibu <u>o</u> or	/uo/ ➡ /o:/	Vowel lengthening
Aonge pesa- I do not have money.	Aaange pesa	/ao/ ➡ /a:/aonge-aaange	Vowel prolongation to mimic local prosody.

Non-Luo speakers in Kibuye Market modify their pronunciation patterns and accent features in order to accommodate Luo customers. Sellers strategically adapt vowel length, consonant articulation, intonation, and prosodic patterns associated with Dholuo speech in order to sound more familiar, friendly and culturally

connected to Luo buyers. Such modifications function as an important accommodation strategy aimed at strengthening customer relations and improving commercial outcomes.

One major pattern evident in the Table 4 was vowel lengthening as a strategy for mimicking Luo phonological patterns. For example, the Dholuo word *Ruoth* (king) was modified into *Rwooth* through prolongation of the vowel sound /o:/, while *Sibuor* (lion) became *Siboor*. Similarly, *adi* in the phrase *Pesa adi?* (How much?) was lengthened to *adii*. These modifications indicate deliberate imitation of Luo speech rhythm and prosody by non-Luo sellers. Through such pronunciation adjustments, sellers attempted to sound linguistically closer to Luo customers, thereby creating familiarity and positive interpersonal connection during transactions. By adopting Luo-like pronunciation patterns, non-Luo sellers reduced perceived social distance and positioned themselves as culturally approachable within the predominantly Luo-speaking market environment. This suggests that accent accommodation was not accidental but strategically employed to attract customers and strengthen interaction.

The final strategy identified was lexical borrowing, reported by 37.5% of participants. Buyers and sellers occasionally inserted words from Dholuo, Kiswahili, English, or other local languages into otherwise monolingual conversations. Borrowed expressions were especially common for greetings, price negotiations, praise expressions, and kinship terms. Lexical borrowing enabled speakers to maintain conversational flow, express culturally meaningful concepts, and signal familiarity with the interlocutor's linguistic background. Although it was less frequent than Kiswahili use, code-switching, or broader linguistic adaptation, lexical borrowing contributed to the flexible multilingual repertoire that characterizes communication in Kibuye Market.

Beyond the four major strategies, participant observation revealed two additional accommodative practices that enriched market interaction. The use of humor and friendly banter, and the use of tags (praise tags, kinship tags and honorific tags) to reduce social distance and create a relaxed bargaining atmosphere as captured between a vendor and her Kisii customer in Conversation 2 below

Seller: (a little smile after seeing her customer)

"Karibu sana, mrembo! But today you are walking like someone with no money!" (*light-laughter with smiles*)

(*Welcome. But today you are walking like someone with no money*)

Buyer: "Eeeh, I'm saving for your wedding gift—you are taking too long to marry!"

Seller: "Ah! You see, that's why you get a discount! You've encouraged me today!" (laughs). Nikuweke nini leo? (*what do I pack for you today?*)

Buyer: Nataka unipe sukari na uweke vizuri si kama jana uliweka kama mwenye anakimbizwa na askari. (*I need sugar and pack well not like yesterday you packed as if policemen where after you*)

Seller: Aaaiii leo nitaongeza kidogo juu ya hiyo harusi. (*Aaaii today I'll add you a small quantity for the sake of that weeding*)

Buyer: Aya basi, Kesho. (Alright. Tomorrow)

In conversation 2 above, the seller uses playful teasing words— "*walking like someone with no money*"—to initiate friendly banter which is not meant to offend but to invite a relaxed atmosphere. The buyer responds in kind, maintaining the humorous tone, *'I'm saving for your wedding gift- you are taking too long to marry!'* This mutual play frames the relationship as more than purely economic, aligning with Similarity Attraction which suggest that shared humor and mutual playfulness enhance attraction and ease of interaction.

Use of tags-praise tags, honorific expressions, and kinship tags are used in Kibuye Market as language accommodation strategy to create social closeness, show respect, reduce social distance and to promote smooth interaction. In sociolinguistics, tags are words, expressions, titles, or forms of address attached to speech to

signal social relationships, politeness, identity, or attitude toward the listener. Some of the kinship tags frequently used include, **jaka-baba** (males with shared ancestry), **nyar-dala** (females with shared homeland), **nyamin** (sister), **omin** (brother), **nyathiwa** (one's brother or sister), **waya** (one's aunt), **owadwa** (brother). Some of the praise tags used includes **rwath** (a bull), **kwach** (leopard), **jaber** (beautiful one) **simba/sibuor** (lion), **omuga** (rhino), **rabet** (extraordinary). These expressions are not meant to be taken literally but symbolically; they ascribe qualities of strength, courage, or uniqueness to the addressee. Notably, many of these praise tags are drawn from the animal domain, particularly wild animals, symbolizing strength, beauty, or exceptional qualities. Within the market context, such forms of address function as linguistic resources through which marketers acknowledge, elevate, and appreciate their clients, thereby reducing social distance and enhancing interpersonal rapport

Honorific tags included, **boss**, **madam**, **sir**, **mheshimiwa** (honorable), **jatelo** (leader), **jakom** (chairperson). Conversation 3 below captures how these tags are used.

Conversation 3 (observed between a Luo grocer and a Luhya lady customer)

Grocer: *Jaber, nikusaide aje? (Beautiful one, how may I help you?)*

The lady: *Adwa Kabich. Pesa ngapi? (I need cabbage, how much?)*

Grocer: *Kubwa ni one thirty (Big ones goes for one hundred and thirty)*

The lady: *Eh Yawa! Nyathiwa. Hiyo iko juu sana. Wewe ndo ukojuu kwa hii soko... (Eeh No! Our own. That's a bit high)*

Grocer: *Nyar min, leta ninety. Najua utarudi. (My sister, bring ninety. I know you will come back)*

The lady. *Weka. Lakini, hapana. Nipunguzie. (Pack, but no! Reduce amount)*

In conversation 3 above, the Luo grocer refers to the Luhya lady as **Nya min** ("my sister")—not because they are biologically related or having any blood tie, but to foster a sense of closeness and belonging (inclusion). On her side, the decision by the Luhya lady to use Dholuo kinship tag (**Eh yawa! Nyathiwa**) (our own) helped her to beat the price down from Ksh.130 to Ksh. 90. The study shows that both sellers and buyers use these tags for economic reasons-to create a polite and business-friendly atmosphere. Table 5 below show some of the honorific tags captured during participant observation. The same honorific tags can be used for praise tags. Table 5 captures some of the buyers and sellers' utterances with honorific/praise tags noted at different time between sellers and buyers

Table 5: Dholuo Honorific Tags

Speaker	Utterance	Translation	Honorific tag used	Function
Seller	Nyar ruoth , ilal manade	Daughter of chief , you are so lost	Nyar ruoth (daughter of chief)	Status elevation.
Seller	Atwech , kiny iduogi. Mimi hukaa tu hapa.	Hounarable , come back tomorrow. I always sit here	Nyathina (my child)	To bring familiarity or closeness
Seller	Jatelo , jana uliacha kitanda?	Chairman , you left the bed yesterday.	Jatelo (Chairman)	Status elevation
Seller	Wuon nyadhi bei ogore kwany a kwanya	Honorable one , prices have gone down just pick.	Woun nyadhi (Honorable one)	Praise-customer appeal
Buyer	Nyar gi profesa , huonekani?	Sister to professor , you're so lost?	Nyar gi profesa	Loan but adopted. Status elevation
Buyer	Sibuor , hii haiwezi	Lion , this cannot last.	Sibuor (lion)	Strength

	dumu.			
Seller	Thuon , leo usininyime pesa. Hii hapa ni size yako	Cockerel , do not deny me your money today. This one is exactly your size	Thuon (cockerel)	Humor
Buyer	Ile pale, lando Jaber ,	That one, brown beauty .	Lando Jaber	Prestige

As show in Table 5 above, within the market context, such forms of address function as linguistic resources through which marketers acknowledge, elevate, and appreciate their clients, thereby reducing social distance and enhancing interpersonal rapport. In their study, Alo and Soneye (2014), asserts that one of the haggling strategies is the application of honorific tags such as giving titles to customers or sellers. By addressing the buyers using these tags, buyers feel esteemed and appreciated, thus, are lured into purchasing from the seller.

The findings demonstrate that language accommodation in Kibuye Market is a multidimensional communicative practice shaped by the interaction of linguistic diversity, ethnic identity, social relationships, and economic objectives. Kiswahili functions as the dominant shared language that enables communication across ethnic boundaries, while Dholuo and other indigenous languages provide resources for solidarity, familiarity, and customer attraction. Code-switching allows speakers to negotiate meaning, identity, and transactional goals dynamically, whereas linguistic adaptation extends accommodation to pronunciation, speech style, and conversational behavior. Lexical borrowing further enriches this multilingual repertoire by allowing culturally meaningful expressions to circulate across language boundaries. The study therefore concludes that buyers and sellers in Kibuye Market employ language accommodation strategically to achieve mutual understanding, interpersonal closeness, efficient negotiation, customer satisfaction, and successful commercial interaction. In this multilingual marketplace, language is not merely a medium of communication; it is a social, cultural, and economic resource that participants continuously manipulate in order to sustain both human relationships and business success.

Summary

This study investigated the language accommodation strategies used by both buyers and sellers in Kibuye market, Kisumu County, Kenya. The results indicate that the participants use a variety of adaptive language strategies to make the interactions go smoothly, to close social distance and to create trust and transactional effectiveness in the multilingual marketplace. One of the key results is the importance of Kiswahili as a neutral language. In the absence of the identity of an interlocutor, Kiswahili became the most popular language, but ethnic languages were still important for expressing solidarity and group identity.

The study also found that Dholuo is a crucial role player in the accommodation market, especially for the sellers. This difference in the use of the Dholuo language between sellers and buyers was attributed to the more familiar language context sellers operate in and the need to be understood by the majority of the population, who speak the Luo language. Using the customers' local language helped build rapport between the seller and the customer, foster a sense of familiarity, and increase the likelihood of attracting and retaining customers. This shows that there is a strong association between local language use in the market and relationship building and commercial advantage. Likewise, Luhya and Ekegusii were the languages used in accommodation, particularly for a wider range of customers relating to the sellers. Sellers were very multilingual flexible in switching to these languages when dealing with clients from these communities. However, buyers were more selective in their use, primarily in dealing with co-ethnic sellers. The traders' language choices reflect their ability to adapt to multilingualism, driven by the necessity to communicate with a variety of customers and capitalize on market opportunities.

The other significant result is that code switching is widely used as an adaptive strategy for communication. Often within a conversation, participants would switch between Kiswahili, Dholuo, Luhya, Ekegusii, sometimes English or Sheng'. Code switching helped the speakers to understand the other person, to negotiate a sale price and to establish social closeness. Sellers frequently changed the language to align with customers' preference, leading to an increase in trust and sales. Code switching was also utilized strategically by the buyers, especially in bargaining, so that they will not be labeled as socially distant and economically

privileged. The results also revealed that the strategy of convergence is the prevailing mode of accommodation strategy in Kibuye Market. The sellers often exchanged words or spoke in a more generalized manner or spoke in the buyer's first language to improve clarity and minimize social distance. The use of a more informal or familiar linguistic style (downward convergence) was particularly prevalent and seen as a very effective way to improve the buyer–seller relationship. This convergence engendered a spirit of trust and collaboration, fostering successful transactions.

Accent mobility was also a subtle yet significant accommodation strategy found in the study. Some attributes of pronunciation were characteristic of Dholuo, Ekegusii, and Luhya speakers, and they were easy to recognize, although buyers and sellers at times modified their pronunciation to sound like their conversational partners. For example, non-Luo speakers sometimes used Luo-like pronunciation when providing service to the Luo customers and buyers adjusted their pronunciation when negotiating. Accent adjustment thus served as a social cue of openness, friendliness, and eagerness to engage with others with different accents. One significant practice was to use relational and honorific words. Sellers often referred to customers as auntie, uncle, madam and boss, or with local Dholuo language terms like **omin** (brother) and **jakom** (chairman); these were deliberately used to express familiarity, respect and solidarity. Relational labels made people feel closer to others, felt at ease with them, and supported positive transactional relationships. These address forms served as universal language forms that cut across ethnic and language barriers in the multilingual context of Kibuye Market.

Lastly, it was observed that both the use of humor and casual joking are frequent to help overcome communication barriers and keep the buyer–seller relationship positive. Sellers would try to joke with their customers, and sometimes use the words or expressions of the customers' language. To foster a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, minimise potential tension from linguistic misunderstandings and to display cultural sensitivity, humor was used. Any efforts were well received and rapport was enhanced even if they were somewhat humorous in a customer's own language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed,

The Kisumu County Government, in collaboration with markets stakeholders should promote Kiswahili as the primary language for inclusivity in the market. Basic Kiswahili reading and communication initiatives for traders should be enhanced periodically to help the marketers communicate effectively.

Train traders in linguistic flexibility. Sellers and buyers should be sensitized to the importance of linguistic flexibility, such as changing the language, accent, tone and expressions to the customer's preferred language to enhance the clarity of the oral communication during the trade.

The County Government and marketers should create awareness on the importance of inclusive language practices and discourage over reliance on ethnic languages in interactions involving interlocutors from different linguistic background. Traders should take advantage to being aware of a buyer's code, when possible, to encourage customer comfort, satisfaction, trust and repeat business.

Areas for Further Research

There is need to conduct further research on other communicative devices that were not studied in this research, including politeness strategies, intonation, gesture and other multimodal interactional resources which may affect the bargaining, pricing and customer relationship. Comparative studies that include other markets in both rural and urban areas in Kisumu County and other parts of the country would also help identify whether the accommodation strategies observed in Kibuye Market are unique to urban area or are common to the multilingual trading observed in Kenya. Further research could also explore the impact of digital platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok on new ways of language accommodation among traders and customers in hybrid online–offline market settings.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that language accommodation strategies are essential for effective communication in Kibuye Market. Buyers and sellers commonly employ Kiswahili, code-switching, accent adjustment, humor, and relational expressions to facilitate understanding, reduce social distance, and build rapport during commercial interactions. Sellers tend to show greater flexibility in adapting to buyers' language preferences, largely because successful communication supports economic exchange. Overall, multilingual accommodation in Kibuye Market functions not only as a practical tool for conducting trade but also as an important resource for maintaining positive social relationships and cohesion in a linguistically diverse urban marketplace. While the findings provide useful insights into language accommodation practices in the market, the relatively small sample size of 24 participants constitutes a limitation of the study. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all buyers and sellers in Kibuye Market or other multilingual marketplaces.

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