

Research Paper



Voices from the waterside: a sociolinguistic study of fish trade communication in itu

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: 21 February 2025 Revised: 14 May 2025 Accepted: 22 May 2025 Published: 09 July 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Ethnography Speech Act Communication Language Use Socio-Linguistics</p> <div data-bbox="219 1179 425 1403">A white rectangular button with a circular arrow icon containing a red and yellow shape. The text "Check for updates" is written in black, sans-serif font below the icon.</div>	<p>The linguistic dynamics and communication patterns of fish dealers in three important waterside communities: Obot Itu beach, Mbiabo bridge beach, and Oku Iboku water front are examined in this study. Using a sociolinguistic approach, the study examines the strategic use of language in the context of fish trading, emphasising the interaction of communication, culture, and commerce. To guarantee a thorough analysis, the study used a survey method in addition to focused group interviews, non-participant observation, and secondary data sources. Thirty informants in all were purposefully chosen from the previously stated locations. Speech Act Theory served as the analytical framework for the descriptive analysis of the data, allowing for the identification and interpretation of a variety of speech acts that define the transactional and interpersonal interactions among fish dealers, including directions, commissives, expressives, and assertives. The results show that the trading communities' socioeconomic realities and cultural values are reflected in the abundant use of indigenous linguistic resources, context-specific jargon, and practical techniques. In addition to providing insights into how language shapes social interaction in local marketplaces, this research advances our understanding of grassroots economic communication.</p>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential tool for expressing and negotiating culture, identity, and social connections; it is more than just a means of information transmission. Language assumes a special

functional role in marketplaces and economic environments as a tool for economic transaction, social bonding, persuasion, and bargaining. The goal of this study is to investigate the linguistic nuances of the fish trading community in Itu, a riverine region in southern Nigeria known for its thriving fish markets and rich cultural legacy.

An appropriate framework for researching the dynamic linguistic practices of fish dealers, purchasers, and intermediaries in this area is sociolinguistics, which studies the interaction between language and society. Fish dealing in Itu is a social performance rather than just an economic transaction, involving particular speech patterns, codes, and linguistic techniques that are adapted to the trade's setting, the connections between players, and the community's cultural norms. Language use and choice are socially motivated, as noted by [1], and comprehending them necessitates knowledge of the social norms and institutions that influence speech communities.

The understanding that local economic activities, like fish trade, are rich areas of sociolinguistic interest is what spurred this investigation. In these fields, code-switching, multilingualism, honorifics, proverbs, and other language practices that are ingrained in culture are common communication patterns. Depending on their interlocutors and the situation, traders in Itu frequently switch between Ibibio, Nigerian Pidgin, and English. This bilingual repertoire promotes social cohesiveness, identity affirmation, and transactional success. According to [2] as well as [3], social connotations like intimacy, formality, authority, and solidarity can all be indexed by the language used in a particular situation.

Both language and paralinguistic factors influence the marketplace as a communicative setting. Salient meaning is conveyed by non-verbal communication such as tone of voice and even silence. The combination of spoken and unspoken communication exemplifies [4] idea of the "speech event," in which meaning comprehension depends heavily on environmental cues. Not as much focus has been made on the informal communication practices that support rural economies and influence daily living as formal institutional communication.

This study attempts to record and examine the linguistic ideologies, interactional routines, and communication norms that define this economic and social context by concentrating on the fish trade in Itu. Additionally, the language traits, sociolinguistic trends, and communication techniques used by fish dealers in Itu Local Government will be investigated. In the waterside marketplace, it will examine how language is utilised to carry out business dealings, negotiate social positions, and uphold cultural identity. A comprehensive, context-sensitive description of commerce communication in a multilingual Nigerian society is the ultimate goal of the study.

The Itu People of Akwa Ibom State

As members of the state's largest and oldest ethnic group, the Ibibio, the Itu people have strong linguistic, cultural, and historical ties to other Ibibio-speaking communities. Traditional customs, oral literature, and daily communication all depend on their language, an Ibibio dialect. The people's occupation, food culture, and social life are greatly influenced by the riverine terrain and abundant fishing grounds of Itu, which is strategically located along the Cross River. With the region's waterside markets acting as centres for both local and regional trade, fishing, farming, and trading are the main economic activities.

The Itu people are renowned for their lively festivals, deep familial ties, and rich folklore. Social organisation and community governance are still influenced by age-old organisations and processes. The Itu people are deeply spiritual and uphold a combination of traditional and Christian religious beliefs, as evidenced by their rites and rituals that honour nature and their ancestors. They are an essential component of Akwa Ibom's cultural mosaic because of their communal way of life and language history.

2. RELATED WORK

Marketplace Communication as a Sociolinguistic Domain

Marketplace communication is a thriving and dynamic sociolinguistic realm where language use includes social negotiation, identity expression, and cultural performance in addition to transactional trade. In multilingual and multiethnic nations like Nigeria, the marketplace is a hub of many linguistic patterns

influenced by sociocultural norms and economic goals. Markets are "contact zones" where different languages and dialects meet, according to sociolinguists like [5]. As [6] posits, participants commonly use code-switching and code-mixing in these situations to accommodate various interlocutors, promote comprehension, and establish or negotiate social identities. For example, traders may alternate between Nigerian Pidgin, English, and indigenous languages based on the buyer's ethnic background or social standing. This is consistent with the communicative competency hypothesis of [7], which emphasises the significance of language use in a particular social situation. Furthermore, language choice and discourse patterns reflect power dynamics in the marketplace. Language serves as symbolic capital, according to [8], and speakers use their linguistic repertoire to demonstrate their authority, legitimacy, or unity. To sway consumer behaviour and establish connection, Nigerian sellers frequently use persuasive language techniques like humour, proverbs, and flattery [9]. These tactics exhibit both cultural understanding and economic acumen. Also, nonverbal clues like tone, gestures, and facial expressions are used in marketplace communication and have important negotiating implications. These contextualisation clues are crucial for accurately comprehending speech acts, according to [4]. For instance, in many African markets, a pause, a grin, or a small nod can convey agreement or hesitancy while striking a deal. The marketplace also provides a platform for the performance of regional identities and the upholding of social norms. Localised language and cultural allusions are frequently used by traders to promote in-group cohesion. In his research on Ibibio-speaking communities, [10] notes that the employment of native metaphors and idioms in commerce not only improves communication but also reflects ingrained cultural values.

Language and Trade in Nigerian Contexts

In the complicated and multilingual country of Nigeria, language is essential to commercial facilitation. Nigerian marketplaces, where more than 500 languages are spoken nationwide, are linguistic melting pots where communication is both adaptive and strategic [11]. In order to establish rapport, negotiate meaning, and carry out transactions, traders and buyers frequently use a combination of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and local languages. Nigerian Pidgin facilitates communication amongst speakers of many ethnic groups by acting as a lingua franca in numerous urban and rural marketplaces. According to [12], [13], Nigerian Pidgin works especially well in informal economic contexts because of its adaptability and impartiality. Indigenous languages that provide cultural familiarity and identity reinforcement, such as Yoruba, Hausa, and Ibibio, are still widely used in local marketplaces. In these situations, code-switching is a typical communication tactic. According to [14], participants' ethnic background, age, and perceived social standing are among the sociolinguistic factors that influence language choice in Nigerian trade contexts rather than being random. For instance, traders may return to their original tongue to promote intimacy or a sense of shared identity while switching to English to communicate formality or authority.

Furthermore, proverbs, idioms, and nonverbal cues are frequently used in trade communication to highlight urgency, humour, or trust [15], [16], [17]. These culturally rich characteristics show how language has been incorporated into regional conventions and economic practices. In Nigerian trading contexts, language serves as a means of conveying social ties, identity, and cultural values in addition to being a tool for commercial exchange.

3. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive, sociolinguistic technique is used in this study to investigate fish trade communication in Akwa Ibom State's Itu Local Government. Non-participant observation, focused group interviews, survey techniques, and secondary sources were all employed to gather data. 30 informants in all were chosen by purposeful selection from three important fish trading sites: Oku Iboku water front, Obot Itu beach, and Mbiabo bridge beach. Selected for their active participation in the fish trade, these participants include buyers, sellers, and market middlemen. Demographic data and insights into the language usage trends of participants in the marketplace were obtained through surveys. Focused group interviews made it possible to have in-depth conversations regarding language preferences, communication tactics, and social norms that regulate commercial interactions. Using non-participant

observation, real-time market interactions were observed, with an emphasis on speech acts and nonverbal communication. To offer more background, secondary sources were also examined, such as market reports and related literature. Speech Act Theory was used to analyse the data, with an emphasis on the perlocutionary effects (like influence and persuasion) and illocutionary acts (like requests and promises) that are present in commercial contacts. This approach makes it possible to comprehend in great depth how language is used in the fish trade and how it represents the sociocultural dynamics of the local community.

Theory

The Speech Act Theory further developed by [18] after [19] had first proposed, is the theory adopted for this study. It asserts that language is employed to carry out acts in addition to communicating information. Austin identifies three categories of utterances: locutionary actions, which are the actual words spoken; illocutionary acts, which are the intended purpose of the utterance, such as asking or promising; and perlocutionary acts, which are the effects the speech has on the listener. In addition, [20] divided speech actions into five groups: directions, expressives, declaratives, assertives, and commissives.

Speech Act Theory offers a strong analytical framework for analysing how language is used operationally in the marketplace in the context of this study. For instance, traders may use their words to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction, to instruct (e.g., pressuring clients to purchase), or to commissively (e.g., promising fresh goods). By identifying the speech acts inherent in these exchanges, the study will demonstrate how fish dealers use language strategically to negotiate prices, develop social ties, and perform culturally determined communicative roles. Thus, this theory makes it possible to comprehend the practicalities of trade communication in a multilingual and culturally distinctive context like Itu on a deeper level.

Data Presentation

Table 1. Data on Fish Trade Communication in Itu (Obot Itu and Mbiabo Bridge)

Sr. No.	Utterance	Speech Act Type	Illocutionary Force
1	"Madam, dis fish fresh well-well."	Assertive	Convincing customer
2	"Buy quickly before e finish."	Directive	Urgency creation
3	"I go keep your own."	Commissive	Promise to reserve
4	"Na today we catch am."	Assertive	Truth claim
5	"You go like this big one."	Directive/Assertive	Persuasion
6	"Abeg, price am now."	Directive	Request
7	"If you come tomorrow, e no go dey."	Assertive	Prediction
8	"God bless you for buying from me."	Expressive	Gratitude
9	"No vex, I no go lie."	Expressive/Assertive	Politeness and honesty
10	"Put more fish for me, abeg."	Directive	Bargaining
11	"I don pack the best for you."	Commissive	Reassurance
12	"This one na ₦2,000."	Assertive	Pricing info
13	"Reduce am small."	Directive	Negotiation
14	"I no get change now."	Assertive	Transactional fact
15	"Make I go bring another basket."	Commissive	Task intention
16	"You too dey price."	Expressive	Complaint
17	"Carry your fish come here."	Directive	Instruction
18	"I go sell give you ₦1,800 last."	Commissive	Final offer
19	"This one don soft."	Assertive	Evaluation
20	"E never spoil, smell am."	Directive/Assertive	Justification
21	"I swear, na fresh from river."	Assertive	Vouching authenticity
22	"See the size now, no be small fish."	Assertive	Emphasis
23	"This one better pass that one."	Assertive	Comparison

24	"You fit roast or dry am."	Assertive	Cooking suggestion
25	"Bring your money make I cut am."	Directive	Call to action

Table 2. Data on Fish Trade Communication in Itu (Oku Iboku Water Front)

Sr. No.	Utterance	Speech Act Type	Illocutionary Force
1	"No touch that fish like that!"	Directive	Command
2	"I dey sorry, I go wash am well."	Expressive/Commissive	Apology & promise
3	"This one na customer fish."	Declaration	Designation
4	"How many you wan buy?"	Directive	Interrogative
5	"I sabi you well; you be my regular."	Expressive	Familiarity
6	"I no dey cheat my customer."	Assertive	Trust building
7	"Oya, bring scale make I weigh am."	Directive	Transaction coordination
8	"No be like before, price don go up."	Assertive	Economic condition
9	"Make I help you carry am go motor."	Commissive	Service offer
10	"Wetin you dey find?"	Directive	Buyer engagement
11	"Na so market be now."	Assertive	Generalization
12	"Come back later, I go get big fish."	Commissive	Future assurance
13	"I thank you, you too dey support me."	Expressive	Appreciation
14	"Na from Oron we bring this one."	Assertive	Local sourcing info
15	"Wait make I bring your balance."	Commissive	Transactional closure
16	"Put nylon inside basket."	Directive	Instruction
17	"No worry, I fit give you cold one."	Commissive	Substitution offer
18	"This na last price, no dey argue."	Commissive/Directive	Firm negotiation
19	"You go need pepper fish for this one."	Assertive	Suggestion
20	"Don't scatter the fish!"	Directive	Warning
21	"I dey happy say you like am."	Expressive	Satisfaction
22	"This basket na for export."	Declaration	Functional allocation
23	"You go still come back tomorrow."	Assertive	Predictive sales talk
24	"I no dey cut small-small."	Assertive	Trade ethics
25	"Customer, come see fresh croaker!"	Directive	Sales attraction
26	"No be wetin you talk yesterday?"	Assertive	Reminder

Figures**Figure 1.** Fish Sellers in Okepedi Market Washing Fishes © Aksg.Gov. Ng



Figure 2. A Fish Seller and Buyer Negotiating the Price of Fish



Figure 3. Fresh and Smoked Fish



Figure 4. Fresh Fish Being Displayed, Ready for Sale. © aksg.gov.ng



Figure 5. Fishseller and Buyer Negotiating the Price of Fish

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assertives

As shown in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#), assertives are used for assertions of truth, explanations, evaluations, and assurances.

Examples: "Na today we catch am.", "Price don go up."

Function: Convince, establish credibility, and offer a factual foundation.

Directives

As shown in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#), directives start a conversation, offer instructions, or pose questions.

Examples: "Buy quick before e finish.", "Put nylon inside basket."

Function: Manage interactions, push for urgency, and coordinate sales.

Commissives

As shown in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#), commisives gives guarantee, pledge, or provide support.

Examples: "I go keep your own.", "Make I help you carry am."

Function: Establish confidence and rapport during transactions.

Expressives

Expressives as shown in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#), are used to show appreciation, grievances, or feelings.

Examples: "God bless you.", "I dey happy say you like am."

Function: Develop empathy and social ties.

Declarations

Declarations are used, as shown in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#), to alter the sales status or assign duties.

Examples: "This one na customer fish.", "This basket na for export."

Function: Sort products and allocate values.

According to the data in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#), multilingualism, cultural norms, and strategic speech actions interact dynamically to influence fish trade communication in Itu. In the waterside markets, vendors and consumers regularly transition between Ibibio, Nigerian Pidgin, and English based on the social setting and linguistic background of the other party. This code-switching reflects the region's broad ethnic composition and makes communication easier. As shown in [Table 1](#), the state cleanliness both of the seller and the utensils used in selling is what attracts customers. Hence, the sellers do their best to ensure hygiene. Also, as shown in [Figure 2](#), [Figure 3](#), [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#), the beauty of the fishes are exemplified in the manner of display. Fishes attract buyers when they are properly arranged and neatly displayed. The craft of displayed is ensured by sellers.

It has been noted that speech acts such as requests, offers, and promises are essential to negotiations. For example, merchants frequently utilise directive speech acts to promote sales, whereas commissive actions promises of high-quality goods are used to foster repeat business and confidence. In order to build rapport and preserve social interactions, expressive behaviours like greetings and complaints are crucial. It has also been discovered that nonverbal clues, such as tone of voice and gestures, enhance meaning and reinforce social cues in addition to spoken exchanges.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how multilingualism and speech acts support social connections and economic transactions by highlighting the intricate and calculated use of language in the Itu fish trade. Traders negotiate the marketplace while strengthening social relationships and identities through code-switching, speech acts like commands and promises, and culturally imprinted expressions. Additionally,

because Nigerian Pidgin is accessible to all linguistic groups in Uyo, it dominates conversations in this context. Repetitive, exaggerated, and metaphor-heavy utterances are frequently used to increase persuasiveness. The language is ingrained with references to kinship, price haggling, and consumer loyalty. The relationship between language and economic behaviour in comparable contexts might be further explored.

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Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Kingsley James Effiong	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. This study did not involve any human subjects, personal data, or interviews requiring informed consent.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable. The research did not involve any procedures or participants requiring ethical review and approval by an institutional board.

Data Availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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