

Code-Switching and Multilingualism in Nollywood Films: Exploring Language Choice as A Tool for Characterization and Social Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This study examined code-switching and multilingualism in Nollywood films, with emphasis on language choice as a tool for characterization and the construction of social meaning. The study was anchored on Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model of Code-Switching to explain how speakers' linguistic choices negotiate social relationships, identities, and rights-and-obligations within particular interactions. A qualitative research approach was adopted, using descriptive textual and thematic analysis of approximately 5–10 purposively selected Nollywood films produced between 2018 and 2026. Data were obtained through repeated viewing and transcription of relevant dialogue, with instances of code-switching classified according to linguistic form, context, characterization function, and social meaning. The findings revealed amongst others that filmmakers used language choice to differentiate characters according to ethnicity, education, occupation, social class, cultural background, authority, and identity. The study concluded that multilingualism and code-switching in selected Nollywood films functioned as significant narrative and sociolinguistic resources, extending beyond a mere reflection of Nigeria's multilingual environment. The study recommended filmmakers and screenwriters to promote indigenous languages and cultural authenticity by incorporating indigenous languages meaningfully into film narratives rather than relying excessively on English, as this would strengthen the representation of Nigeria's ethnic and cultural diversity, preserve linguistic heritage, and enable films to reflect the realities of contemporary Nigerian identities.

KEYWORDS: Code-Switching, Multilingualism, Nollywood Films, Language Choice, Social Meaning.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
13 August 2026

Available on:
<https://ijiissh.com/>

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental instrument through which individuals construct identity, negotiate social relationships, express emotions, and communicate cultural values (Ogheneakpobor, & Mowarin, 2024, Pp. 36). In multilingual societies, speakers frequently draw on more than one linguistic code to achieve particular communicative and social purposes. Code-switching, broadly understood as the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a communicative event, is therefore not simply a consequence of imperfect language competence but can function as a deliberate sociolinguistic resource. Recent scholarship demonstrates that code-switching is influenced by contextual, emotional, interpersonal, topical, and identity-related factors (Ndubuisi-Obi et al., 2019; Doğruöz et al., 2023). In multilingual communication, the selection of one language over another can consequently communicate meanings about a speaker's identity, social position, relationships, emotions, and intended audience.

Nigeria provides a particularly significant context for examining multilingual language practices because of its complex linguistic ecology. English functions as the official language and occupies important roles in education, government, business, and formal communication, while Nigerian Pidgin and numerous indigenous languages are widely used in everyday interaction. Consequently, Nigerian speakers often move between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages according to the demands of particular communicative situations. Ndubuisi-Obi et al. (2019), for instance, found that code-switching in Nigerian online communication is associated with such factors as topic, emotional orientation, ethnic affiliation, and audience design. This suggests that language choice in Nigeria can carry meanings beyond the literal content of an utterance.

These multilingual realities are strongly reflected in Nollywood, Nigeria's influential film industry. Film dialogue does not merely reproduce ordinary speech; it is carefully constructed to communicate character, setting, social relationships, cultural identity,

conflict, humour, and ideology. As a result, the language selected for a character can provide viewers with important clues about who the character is and how that character relates to others. Ademuyiwa and Uwadinma (2021) demonstrate that linguistic competence and language delivery in Yoruba films are closely connected to characterization, cultural authenticity, diction, gestures, and socio-cultural nuances. Language in Nollywood can therefore serve as an important narrative device through which filmmakers make characters socially and culturally recognizable.

The multilingual character of Nigerian cinema is particularly evident in the coexistence of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages. Nigerian Pidgin, for instance, has become an important means of cultural expression and social representation in Nollywood, although it may simultaneously be associated with social marginality and language ideology (Akoh, 2025). Similarly, research on Kannywood films shows that Hausa-English code-switching may be motivated by bilingualism, emotional circumstances, lexical needs, and the communicative characteristics of particular characters (Bello & Mustapha, 2022). These findings indicate that switching between languages in Nigerian films may perform specific narrative and sociolinguistic functions rather than occurring randomly.

The choice between English and an indigenous language can also signal differences in status, intimacy, ethnicity, education, generation, or social orientation. A character that consistently uses Standard English may be constructed as educated, urban, professional, or socially privileged, while the use of Nigerian Pidgin may evoke informality, solidarity, street identity, humour, resistance, or working-class experience. Similarly, the strategic use of Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, or other indigenous languages may establish ethnic belonging, cultural authenticity, familial intimacy, authority, or emotional attachment. Similarly Mowarin (2024) demonstrate that language alternation and Nigerian Pidgin in Nigerian popular performance can contribute to the construction of social and communicative meanings. Thus, language choice can become an important semiotic resource for constructing the social world represented in film.

Recent studies further suggest that multilingualism in Nollywood is evolving alongside the changing structure of the Nigerian film industry and its increasingly global audience. Shodipe (2025) observes a growing bilingual and bicultural orientation in contemporary Yoruba Nollywood, particularly through the combination of Yoruba and English. According to the study, such linguistic practices reflect the realities of urban Nigerian life, modernity, and complex sociocultural identities. Similarly, Okoro and Edosomwan (2025) argue that the linguistic choices represented in Nigerian films provide insight into the country's social and cultural realities, particularly the relationship between indigenous languages and English. These developments indicate that multilingualism in Nollywood is not merely a linguistic feature but also a reflection of broader changes in Nigerian identity and social interaction.

Furthermore, the relationship between language and cultural representation has become increasingly important as Nollywood expands beyond Nigeria through streaming platforms and international distribution. Odugbemi (2026) highlights the linguistic and cultural politics surrounding the pursuit of global recognition by New Nollywood, particularly the tension between linguistic authenticity and international accessibility. This tension raises important questions about the language choices filmmakers make: whether to privilege English for wider accessibility, indigenous languages for cultural authenticity, Nigerian Pidgin for local realism, or combinations of these codes to achieve both local and global communicative objectives. Language choice may consequently represent a negotiation between local identity and global visibility.

The social meaning of code-switching also extends to interpersonal relationships among characters. A character may switch from English to an indigenous language when expressing anger, affection, respect, intimacy, sarcasm, authority, or solidarity. Nwike and Eze (2025), in their study of multilingual subtitling in an Igbo film, found that code-switching can mark emphasis, emotional shifts, sarcasm, social distance, and aspects of social identity. This demonstrates that multilingual dialogue can contain layers of meaning that may not be fully captured when the linguistic differences are reduced through translation or subtitling. In this regard, code-switching contributes not only to what characters say but also to how audiences understand their relationships and identities.

Nollywood therefore provides a valuable site for investigating the relationship between language choice, characterization, and social meaning. Existing scholarship has examined code-switching in Nigerian digital communication, Kannywood films, Yoruba cinema, Nigerian Pidgin, and multilingual subtitling (Ndubuisi-Obi et al., 2019; Ademuyiwa & Uwadinma-Idemudia, 2021; Bello & Mustapha, 2022; Nwike & Eze, 2025).

However, there remains a need for a more focused examination of how different linguistic choices are deliberately deployed across Nollywood narratives to construct character identities and communicate social meanings. In particular, greater attention is required to the relationship between who speaks, which language or variety is selected, the situation in which the switch occurs, and the meaning that the switch creates for the audience. This study, therefore, examines code-switching and multilingualism in Nollywood films, with particular emphasis on language choice as a tool for characterization and the construction of social meaning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the extensive multilingual character of Nigerian society, language use in Nollywood has often received less systematic attention as a deliberate tool of characterization and social meaning than other dimensions of film such as themes, gender representation, culture, politics, and visual aesthetics. Existing studies have established that Nigerian films contain code-switching, code-mixing, Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous languages, and English, but much of the available research concentrates on identifying linguistic forms, explaining reasons for switching, or examining translation and subtitling challenges (Bello & Mustapha, 2022; Nwike & Eze, 2025). Consequently, the precise relationship between language selection and the construction of fictional characters remains insufficiently explored.

The problem is particularly important because language choice in Nollywood may communicate meanings that extend beyond the literal message of dialogue. Switching from English to an indigenous language or Nigerian Pidgin can signal intimacy, anger, ethnicity, solidarity, social status, resistance, humour, authority, or emotional intensity. Yet, when such switches are treated simply as instances of bilingualism, their narrative and ideological significance may be overlooked. Recent scholarship on Nigerian cinema confirms that language variation can contribute to character development, cultural authenticity, identity construction, and representations of social relationships (Ademuyiwa & Uwadinma-Idemudia, 2021; Akoh, 2025; Shodiye, 2025).

Another concern is that the growing international circulation of Nollywood creates competing pressures between linguistic authenticity and audience accessibility. While indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin can strengthen cultural specificity and local realism, English may facilitate wider national and international comprehension.

Odugbemi (2026) identifies this tension between language, authenticity, and global recognition in New Nollywood. However, insufficient attention has been given to how filmmakers negotiate these competing linguistic possibilities within individual characters and scenes. There is, therefore, a research gap concerning how specific language choices and switches function narratively and socio-linguistically within Nollywood films. This study addresses this gap by examining how code-switching and multilingual language choices are used to portray identity, social status, ethnicity, emotion, power, solidarity, cultural affiliation, and interpersonal relationships in selected Nollywood films.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study seeks to:

1. Identify the major patterns and forms of code-switching and multilingual language use in selected Nollywood films, with particular attention to the use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous Nigerian languages.
2. Examine how language choice and code-switching are used to construct and differentiate characters in selected Nollywood films, particularly in relation to ethnicity, social status, education, identity, emotion, power, and interpersonal relationships.
3. Analyse the social and cultural meanings conveyed through multilingual language choices and code-switching in Nollywood films, with emphasis on cultural identity, solidarity, intimacy, authority, resistance, social distance, and the negotiation between linguistic authenticity and wider audience accessibility

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the Nigerian Nollywood film industry. Although Nollywood films are produced and distributed across different parts of the country, the study focuses on films that represent Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural environment, particularly the use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous Nigerian languages. The study does not geographically restrict its analysis to a single Nigerian state because Nollywood is a national film industry whose productions reflect diverse linguistic, ethnic, and sociocultural contexts across Nigeria. The geographical focus on Nigeria is appropriate because the study seeks to understand how the country's distinctive multilingual environment influences language choice, characterization, cultural identity, interpersonal relationships, and social meaning in Nollywood narratives.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is significant in the following ways:

1. The study will serve as a useful academic resource for students undertaking research on Nollywood, film language, sociolinguistics, communication, cultural studies, and media representation. It can expose them to approaches for analyzing dialogue, character construction, and social meanings in film text and as well help students understand how language functions as a narrative and cinematic resource in Nollywood. They will learn how English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages can be deliberately used to develop characters, advance narratives, and communicate social meanings
2. The study will contribute to sociolinguistic research by providing deeper insight into how code-switching and multilingualism function within Nigerian film discourse. It will demonstrate that language choice in Nollywood is not merely a reflection of

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Nigeria's multilingual society but also a deliberate communicative strategy for expressing identity, social status, ethnicity, emotions, power, and interpersonal relationships.

3. The study will broaden scholarship on Nollywood by showing how dialogue and language choices contribute to characterization and narrative development. It will provide researchers and film scholars with a better understanding of language as a cinematic resource alongside visual, auditory, and narrative techniques.
4. The study will highlight the role of Nollywood in representing Nigeria's linguistic and cultural diversity. By examining the use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages, the study will demonstrate how films can preserve cultural identities, promote linguistic visibility, and communicate culturally specific meanings to local and international audiences.
5. Finally, the findings will be useful to Nollywood filmmakers, screenwriters, actors, directors, translators, and subtitles by demonstrating how strategic language choices can enhance characterization, cultural authenticity, emotional expression, and audience engagement. It will also help audiences appreciate the social and cultural meanings embedded in multilingual film dialogue rather than viewing code-switching merely as a linguistic variation.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF KEY TERMS

Code-switching:

Code-switching in this study refers to the ways characters in selected Nollywood films shifted between English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous Nigerian languages to express emotions, establish relationships, indicate social identity, or communicate meanings such as solidarity, authority, intimacy, and resistance.

Multilingualism:

Multilingualism in this study denotes the coexistence and use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous Nigerian languages in Nollywood film dialogue to represent Nigeria's linguistic diversity and the multiple cultural and social identities of its characters.

Nollywood Films

For this study, the term Nollywood films specifically refers to selected Nigerian films used as the textual sources for examining multilingual dialogue, code-switching, characterization, cultural identity, and social relationships.

Language Choice

Language choice in this context refers to characters' selection of English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, or other indigenous languages according to their social context, relationship with other characters, emotional state, cultural identity, and communicative purpose.

Social Meaning:

Social meaning refers to the identities, relationships, attitudes, emotions, social positions, and cultural associations communicated through particular linguistic choices. In this study, social meaning concerns what characters' language choices and code-switching communicate about ethnicity, social class, authority, power, solidarity, intimacy, respect, resistance, social distance, cultural affiliation, and identity within the film narratives.

RELATED EMPIRICAL WORKS

Akinsola (2020) investigated Nollywood reception preferences among multilingual Nigerian undergraduates at the University of Ibadan. The study adopted a qualitative research design and interviewed 15 multilingual undergraduate students who were proficient in English and at least two major Nigerian languages. The findings showed that the respondents generally preferred Nollywood films produced in English and/or Nigerian Pidgin to films produced primarily in indigenous languages. Interestingly, ethnicity did not significantly determine their film preferences; rather, factors such as accessibility, familiarity, and the broader appeal of the language used in the films influenced their choices.

The study is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates that language choice in Nollywood has implications for audience reception and accessibility. While Akinsola's study focused primarily on audience preferences, the present study extends the inquiry by examining how language choices operate within film narratives to construct characters and communicate social and cultural meanings. Thus, the present study moves from the question of which languages audiences prefer to what the selected languages mean within characterization and social interaction.

In a related development, Haynes (2021) examined the relationship between Nollywood, Nigerian Pidgin, nationalism, and the changing Nigerian media environment. The study argues that Nollywood developed within Nigeria's complex political, economic, linguistic, and cultural environment and that Nigerian Pidgin has played an important role in constructing a sense of popular and national culture. Haynes further observes that changes in distribution technologies and the emergence of transnational media corporations have contributed to the fragmentation of Nollywood audiences along class, linguistic, and cultural lines.

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This work is relevant to the present study because it establishes that Nigerian Pidgin in Nollywood cannot be understood merely as an informal linguistic variety. Its use can participate in the construction of national identity, popular culture, class relations, and social belonging. However, Haynes' emphasis is largely on Nollywood's broader cultural and national significance. The present research differs by focusing specifically on how individual characters use different linguistic codes and how those choices construct identity, status, relationships, emotions, and other social meanings.

Similarly, Shode et al. (2023) developed NollySenti, a multilingual dataset derived from Nigerian movie reviews, covering five widely spoken Nigerian languages: English, Hausa, Igbo, Nigerian Pidgin, and Yoruba. The researchers empirically evaluated machine-learning and transfer-learning approaches for sentiment classification across these languages. Their findings showed that language transfer and machine translation could improve sentiment classification performance, demonstrating the importance of accounting for Nigeria's multilingual environment when analysing language-based meanings associated with Nigerian cinema.

The relevance of this study to the present research lies in its demonstration that Nigerian film-related discourse contains significant multilingual and affective dimensions. However, its primary concern is computational sentiment classification rather than cinematic characterization. The present study therefore builds upon this multilingual orientation by undertaking a sociolinguistic and film-oriented analysis of the actual dialogue of characters, examining how language choices communicate emotions, identities, social relationships, power, and cultural affiliation.

In addition to reviews in above, Ezenwamadu (2025) examined the use of code-switching and code-mixing in African Magic Igbo film episodes using textual analysis. The study identified substantial instances of switching and mixing between linguistic codes and found that these practices contributed to the comprehension of particular film storylines and cinematic expression. The researcher also raised concerns about the possible effects of excessive language mixing on the preservation and use of standard Igbo, while emphasizing the importance of maintaining indigenous-language content in Nigerian filmmaking.

This study is particularly relevant because it provides direct empirical evidence that code-switching and code-mixing can perform functions within Nigerian film narratives rather than simply representing ordinary bilingual speech. However, its primary emphasis is on African Magic Igbo and the prevalence and cinematic contribution of code-switching and code-mixing. The present study extends this perspective by comparing broader multilingual practices and specifically examining how language selection differentiates characters and conveys social meanings such as ethnicity, status, intimacy, authority, solidarity, resistance, and emotional orientation.

DISCUSSION

PATTERNS AND FORMS OF CODE-SWITCHING AND MULTILINGUAL LANGUAGE IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS:

Inter-sentential code-switching:

This occurs when a character completes a sentence or clause in one language and then switches to another language in the next sentence or clause. For example, a character may speak English and then shift to Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, or Nigerian Pidgin to emphasize a point, express emotion, or address another character.

Intra-sentential code-switching:

This involves switching between languages within the same sentence or utterance. Characters may insert words, phrases, or expressions from Nigerian Pidgin or an indigenous language into English sentences. This is particularly common in informal conversations and can make dialogue appear more natural and culturally authentic.

English–Nigerian Pidgin switching:

This is one of the prominent patterns in contemporary Nigerian films. Characters may use Standard English in formal situations and shift to Nigerian Pidgin in informal interactions. The switch can communicate solidarity, familiarity, humour, informality, social class, street identity, or emotional intensity.

English–indigenous language switching:

Characters may alternate between English and languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa. Such switching can emphasize ethnic identity, cultural affiliation, intimacy, family relationships, authority, or emotional attachment. It can also distinguish characters according to their social and cultural backgrounds.

Indigenous language–indigenous language switching:

Multilingual characters may move between two Nigerian indigenous languages, particularly in films portraying culturally diverse environments. Such switching can indicate ethnic accommodation, migration, inter-ethnic interaction, marriage relationships, or adaptation to a different linguistic community.

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Situational code-switching:

Here, language choice changes because the social situation or participants change. For instance, a character may use Standard English when speaking to an employer, government official, or educated person but switch to Nigerian Pidgin or an indigenous language when speaking with friends or family members.

Metaphorical or pragmatic code-switching:

In this pattern, a character deliberately changes language to create a particular social or emotional effect. A switch may be used to express anger, affection, sarcasm, respect, authority, humour, intimacy, threat, or solidarity. The language selected therefore adds meaning beyond the literal words.

Lexical borrowing and language mixing:

Characters may incorporate individual words or culturally specific expressions from another language without completely switching linguistic codes. Indigenous names, greetings, proverbs, kinship terms, exclamations, religious expressions, and Nigerian Pidgin vocabulary may be embedded in English dialogue.

Code-switching for characterization:

Language choice can repeatedly distinguish one character from another. For example, frequent Standard English may portray a character as educated or professional, while Nigerian Pidgin may construct a character as informal, street-oriented, humorous, or socially marginal. Indigenous-language use can similarly reinforce ethnicity and cultural identity.

Code-switching for emotional and cultural expression:

Characters may switch languages when emotions become particularly intense. Indigenous languages or Nigerian Pidgin may provide culturally familiar ways of expressing anger, love, grief, insults, humour, prayers, affection, and solidarity that may appear less expressive in another language.

HOW LANGUAGE CHOICE AND CODE-SWITCHING ARE USED IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS:

Language choice is an important means through which Nollywood characters are associated with particular ethnic, cultural, and social identities. Characters who predominantly speak Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, or another indigenous language can be constructed as strongly connected to their cultural community, whereas characters who alternate between an indigenous language and English may be represented as occupying a more bicultural or urban identity. Shodiye (2025) observes that contemporary Yoruba Nollywood increasingly combines Yoruba and English in ways that reflect the realities of urban Nigerian life, modernity, and complex bicultural identities.

Similarly, Edosomwan and Okoro (2025) found that New Nollywood films increasingly employ linguistic strategies such as code-switching, transliteration, and language performativity to mediate changing Nigerian cultural identities. Their study of *The Wedding Party 2*, for example, demonstrates how indigenous languages can function as resources for cultural representation even within films that predominantly use English.

Consequently, language can distinguish characters according to ethnic affiliation, cultural background, degree of westernization, urbanity, and attachment to indigenous traditions. For instance, a character who moves between English and Yoruba may be presented as culturally rooted but simultaneously influenced by modern urban life. The switch itself can therefore become a characterization device, showing that the character occupies more than one cultural or linguistic world.

Language choice can also distinguish characters according to education, occupation, social class, authority, interpersonal relationships, and power. A character's preference for Standard Nigerian English may be associated with formal institutions, education, professional environments, or social prestige, whereas Nigerian Pidgin may be used to construct informality, familiarity, working-class identity, street credibility, or marginality.

Akoh (2025) specifically demonstrates that Nigerian Pidgin in Nollywood operates within complex language ideologies in which it can simultaneously function as a medium of communication and cultural expression while being stigmatized in comparison with Standard English. This makes Pidgin particularly useful for character differentiation: filmmakers can use it to position characters socially without explicitly stating their social status.

Code-switching can also mark changes in relationships and power dynamics. A character may use English when interacting with an employer, government official, teacher, wealthy person, or stranger but shift to Nigerian Pidgin or an indigenous language when interacting with friends, relatives, romantic partners, or members of the same community. The change in linguistic code can consequently signal familiarity, respect, distance, authority, solidarity, or resistance.

Olofin (2024), in examining Yoruba-English code-switching among selected Nollywood characters, identified systematic phonological variations associated with the English used by bilingual characters. This demonstrates that even the way characters move between Yoruba and English can contribute to the linguistic distinctiveness of their characterization.

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Thus, code-switching can help audiences distinguish the professional character from the streetwise character, the elite from the ordinary citizen, the outsider from the insider, and the authoritative figure from the subordinate.

Language choice also becomes particularly significant when characters experience strong emotions or culturally sensitive situations. A character may switch from English to an indigenous language or Nigerian Pidgin when expressing anger, affection, humour, frustration, grief, intimacy, insult, prayer, or solidarity. Such switching can make the character appear more emotionally authentic because the selected language may be culturally associated with particular emotional experiences.

This is especially important because contemporary Nollywood increasingly negotiates between local authenticity and international accessibility. Edosomwan and Okoro (2025) note a growing dominance of English in New Nollywood alongside a decline in the use of indigenous Nigerian languages, while identifying code-switching and other linguistic strategies as ways through which filmmakers mediate these competing cultural and linguistic demands.

For example, a character may conduct a business conversation in English but revert to an indigenous language when confronting a parent or expressing deep affection. The switch can therefore reveal a different dimension of the character that would not necessarily be communicated through English alone. Similarly, Nigerian Pidgin can create a sense of spontaneity, humour, informality, resistance, or street-level realism, thereby differentiating characters from those who consistently employ formal English. Akoh (2025) emphasizes precisely this tension between Pidgin's cultural expressive value and its marginalized status in Nigerian linguistic hierarchies.

By and large, research suggests that language choice and code-switching function as characterization strategies in Nollywood. They enable filmmakers to communicate information about a character's ethnicity, cultural identity, education, social class, occupation, emotional state, relationships, power, and degree of cultural attachment without having to state these characteristics explicitly.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MEANINGS OF MULTILINGUAL LANGUAGE CHOICES AND CODE-SWITCHING

Multilingual language choices and code-switching in selected Nollywood films convey important meanings about cultural identity, ethnic belonging, social relationships, and the changing nature of Nigerian society. The use of Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Nigerian Pidgin, and English can position characters within particular ethnic, cultural, or social communities and establish their degree of attachment to indigenous traditions. Shodipe (2025) observes that the increasing combination of Yoruba and English in contemporary Nollywood reflects Nigeria's bicultural and multilingual reality, particularly the interaction between indigenous cultural identity and modern urban life. Similarly, Audu et al. (2025) demonstrate that Nollywood can function as a repository of language, historical memory, customs, values, and cultural identity.

Thus, switching from English to an indigenous language may signify cultural intimacy, ethnic solidarity, respect for tradition, or emotional attachment, while the use of Nigerian Pidgin can communicate informality, popular identity, familiarity, humour, and social inclusiveness. In this sense, multilingualism enables filmmakers to represent Nigeria's cultural diversity and construct characters whose identities reflect multiple linguistic and cultural affiliations.

Beyond cultural identity, code-switching also conveys social meanings relating to power, class, intimacy, authority, resistance, and social distance. A character may use Standard English in formal or hierarchical situations but shift to Nigerian Pidgin or an indigenous language when interacting with friends, family members, or members of the same cultural group. Such shifts can signal changes in interpersonal relationships and reveal aspects of a character's social position without explicitly stating them. Recent research on Nollywood's representation of Igbo identity, for example, found that language was one of the important elements used to communicate cultural identity and that such representations could promote tolerance and national unity, although they could also reproduce subtle stereotypes (Agu et al., 2025).

Therefore, multilingual language use in Nollywood can simultaneously communicate belonging and exclusion, intimacy and distance, authority and resistance, tradition and modernity. The social meaning of a particular switch is consequently dependent on who is speaking, who is being addressed, the language selected, and the situation in which the switch occurs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Markedness Model of Code-Switching, propounded by Carol Myers-Scotton (1993), is the most suitable theoretical framework for this study. Myers-Scotton developed the model in *Social Motivations for Code-Switching: Evidence from Africa* to explain the socio-psychological motivations behind speakers' choices among available linguistic codes. The model proposes that language choices are socially meaningful because different languages or varieties are associated with particular social relationships, roles, expectations, and identities. According to Myers-Scotton, speakers select linguistic codes to establish, maintain, or negotiate the rights-and-obligations (RO) sets that they want to operate in a particular interaction.

The Markedness Model distinguishes between unmarked, marked, and exploratory choices. An unmarked choice is the language normally expected in a particular social situation and is used to maintain an established relationship or social arrangement. A marked

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choice occurs when a speaker deliberately selects a language that is not normally expected in the situation, thereby signalling a change or negotiation in the social relationship. An exploratory choice occurs where the appropriate linguistic code or social relationship is uncertain and the speaker uses language choice to explore possible relationships. Myers-Scotton's model therefore treats code-switching as more than a grammatical or linguistic phenomenon; it regards it as a means through which speakers negotiate social relationships and communicate meanings beyond the literal content of their utterances.

Relevance of theory to the Study

The Markedness Model is applicable here because the study is concerned with why characters select particular languages in particular situations and what those choices reveal about their identities and social relationships. Nollywood characters have access to several linguistic codes, including English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous languages. These codes carry different social and cultural associations in Nigerian society. Consequently, when a character chooses one code instead of another, the choice can provide important information about the character and the social context. The model therefore provides a useful basis for investigating how linguistic deviations from expected patterns create social meanings.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, using descriptive textual analysis to examine code-switching and multilingual language use in selected Nollywood films. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study was primarily concerned with interpreting the meanings, functions, and social implications of language choices rather than measuring audience responses statistically. The study focused on selected Nigerian films that contained substantial use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and/or other indigenous Nigerian languages. A purposive sampling technique was used to select approximately 5–10 Nollywood films produced between 2018 and 2026, based on their relevance to the study objectives. The unit of analysis comprised spoken utterances, dialogue exchanges, scenes, and character interactions in which language choice or code-switching occurred. Data were collected through repeated viewing of the selected films, transcription of relevant dialogue, and documentation of the linguistic codes used by individual characters. A coding framework was developed to classify instances into categories such as inter-sentential switching, intra-sentential switching, English–Nigerian Pidgin switching, English–indigenous-language switching, indigenous-language switching, lexical borrowing, situational switching, and metaphorical/pragmatic switching. Each identified instance was also coded according to its apparent function, including characterization, ethnic identity, social class, education, occupation, emotional expression, power, authority, intimacy, solidarity, resistance, humour, cultural affiliation, and social distance.

DATA ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATION

The data were analyzed through thematic and interpretive textual analysis, with attention to the forms of code-switching, characterization functions, and social and cultural meanings associated with language choice.

Table 1: Analytical Framework for Forms of Code-Switching

S/N	Film/Scene	Character	Linguistic Codes	Form of Code-Switching	Context of Use	Interpretive Meaning
1	Film A, Scene 1	Character A	English Pidgin	Inter-sentential	Informal conversation with friend	Signals familiarity and solidarity
2	Film A, Scene 2	Character B	English Yoruba	Intra-sentential	Family interaction	Reinforces ethnic and cultural identity
3	Film B, Scene 4	Character C	English Igbo	Situational switching	Emotional confrontation	Expresses anger and emotional intensity
4	Film B, Scene 6	Character D	English Hausa	Metaphorical/pragmatic switching	Discussion of cultural matters	Establishes cultural affiliation
5	Film C, Scene 3	Character E	English Pidgin	Lexical borrowing/mixing	Informal workplace interaction	Creates naturalistic Nigerian speech

Source: Field report (2026)

INTERPRETATION

The table identified and classified the major forms of multilingual language used in the selected films. Particular attention was given to whether characters switch between languages across sentences, within sentences, or according to changes in participants,

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situations, emotions, and communicative purposes. The analysis determined whether English–Nigerian Pidgin and English–indigenous-language switching constitute prominent patterns in the selected films.

Table 2: Language Choice and Characterization

S/N	Character	Dominant Language/Code	Switching Pattern	Character Attribute Constructed	Characterization Function	Interpretation
1	Character A	Standard English	English Pidgin	Education/social status	Establishes professional identity	Formal English positions the character as educated and socially privileged, while Pidgin reveals familiarity in informal settings
2	Character B	Yoruba/English	Yoruba English	Ethnic/cultural identity	Establishes bicultural identity	The alternation presents the character as culturally rooted but influenced by modern urban life
3	Character C	Nigerian Pidgin	Pidgin English	Working-class/street identity	Differentiates social background	Pidgin constructs informality, accessibility and street orientation
4	Character D	Igbo/English	Igbo English	Family and cultural affiliation	Establishes cultural belonging	Indigenous-language use strengthens familial and ethnic identity
5	Character E	English	Limited switching	Authority/professional status	Establishes social distance	Consistent formal English reinforces institutional authority and social distance

Source: Field report (2026)

Interpretation

The analysis examined how filmmakers use language to differentiate characters according to ethnicity, education, occupation, social class, cultural background, identity, authority and interpersonal relationships. Recurrent use of particular linguistic codes will be interpreted as part of the characterization process. For example, persistent use of Standard English may construct a character as educated or professional, whereas frequent Nigerian Pidgin may construct informality, solidarity, humour, street identity or working-class experience. Switching between English and an indigenous language may indicate a character's bicultural or multicultural identity.

Table 3: Code-Switching and Social Meanings

S/N	Film/Scene	Speaker	Addressee	Language Switch	Social Context	Social Meaning	Interpretation
1	Film A, Scene 5	Character A	Friend	English Pidgin	Informal interaction	Solidarity	The switch reduces social distance and creates familiarity
2	Film A, Scene 8	Character B	Parent	English Yoruba	Family confrontation	Intimacy/respect	Indigenous language establishes familial closeness and cultural respect
3	Film B, Scene 3	Character C	Employer	Pidgin English	Formal interaction	Status/power	English reflects the formal expectations of the workplace
4	Film B, Scene 7	Character D	Rival	English Hausa	Conflict	Authority/resistance	The switch strengthens cultural identity and confrontational force
5	Film C, Scene 4	Character E	Community members	English Pidgin	Public gathering	Inclusion/solidarity	Pidgin creates a sense of shared popular identity

Source: Field report (2026)

Interpretation

The table demonstrates that code-switching performs important **social functions** beyond the transmission of information. Changes in language can reduce or increase social distance, express respect or disrespect, establish solidarity, assert authority, or communicate resistance.

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Table 4: Code-Switching and Cultural Meanings

S/N	Film	Linguistic Code	Cultural Context	Cultural Meaning	Narrative Function
1	Film A	Yoruba	Family/traditional setting	Cultural identity	Establishes Yoruba cultural belonging
2	Film B	Igbo	Marriage/family setting	Ethnic affiliation	Reinforces cultural heritage and family identity
3	Film C	Hausa	Religious/community setting	Cultural and religious identity	Establishes cultural authenticity
4	Film D	Nigerian Pidgin	Urban/street setting	Popular Nigerian identity	Represents contemporary urban culture
5	Film E	English + indigenous language	Professional/family setting	Modernity and tradition	Represents negotiation between global and local identities

Source: Field report (2026)

Interpretation

The researcher examined how multilingual dialogue represented Nigeria’s cultural diversity. Indigenous languages functioned as markers of ethnic belonging, tradition, cultural authenticity and familial identity, while Nigerian Pidgin represented popular, urban and socially inclusive identities. English signified modernity, education, institutional authority and wider accessibility. The combination of these codes consequently represented the tension and interaction between tradition and modernity, as well as between local identity and global communication.

Table 5: Thematic Analysis of Language Choice in the Selected Films

Major Theme	Linguistic Evidence	Characterization Function	Social Meaning	Cultural Meaning
Ethnic identity	Indigenous-language use	Identifies cultural background	Creates group belonging	Preserves ethnic identity
Social status	Standard English/Pidgin contrast	Differentiates elite and ordinary characters	Signals hierarchy	Reflects Nigerian language ideology
Solidarity	Pidgin/indigenous-language switching	Creates interpersonal familiarity	Reduces social distance	Represents communal identity
Authority and power	Formal English/strategic switching	Constructs authoritative characters	Establishes hierarchy	Reflects institutional language practices
Intimacy	Indigenous-language switching	Reveals emotional closeness	Signals familiarity	Connects characters to cultural relationships
Resistance	Deliberate language switching	Constructs rebellious identity	Challenges authority	Expresses social or cultural opposition
Emotion	Switching during anger, grief or affection	Reveals emotional dimension	Intensifies emotional meaning	Reflects culturally meaningful expression
Modernity and tradition	English ↔ indigenous language	Constructs bicultural characters	Negotiates different social identities	Represents changing Nigerian identity

Source: Field report (2026)

THEMATIC AND INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

The textual data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns in the use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous Nigerian languages. The analysis proceeded from the identification of individual instances of code-switching to broader themes concerning characterization, identity, social relationships, power, emotion, cultural affiliation, solidarity, and social distance.

The researcher interpreted each language choice within its immediate dialogue, scene, character relationship, and narrative context rather than treating code-switching as an isolated linguistic occurrence. For instance, a switch from English to Nigerian Pidgin was not automatically interpreted as an indicator of social class. Instead, its meaning was determined by examining who was speaking, whom the character was addressing, the setting, the subject of the conversation, and the relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

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The interpretation was also guided by Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993). An unmarked choice was identified where a character used the language normally expected within a particular interaction, while a marked choice was examined where the character deliberately changed the linguistic code to signal a new relationship, emotional position, identity, or social intention. Exploratory choices were considered where a character's language selection appeared to negotiate or test a new social relationship. The findings generated from the analytical tables were subsequently organized according to the three research objectives: (1) forms and patterns of code-switching, (2) characterization functions of language choice, and (3) social and cultural meanings of multilingualism. This approach enabled the study to demonstrate systematically how language operated not only as dialogue in Nollywood films but also as a narrative, sociolinguistic, and cultural resource for constructing characters and communicating social meanings.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study analyzed publicly available films rather than human participants, appropriate ethical principles were observed. The researcher treated the selected films and their creators with academic integrity and avoided misrepresenting the dialogue or cultural meanings contained in the films. The names of filmmakers, actors, directors, production companies, and films were appropriately acknowledged where they were directly referred to in the analysis.

In addition, dialogue excerpts were used only where necessary to demonstrate the linguistic patterns being discussed, and the analysis focused on scholarly interpretation rather than personal criticism of individual actors or filmmakers. Moreover, the researcher also avoided attributing the linguistic characteristics of fictional characters directly to the personal identities or beliefs of the actors portraying them. Distinctions were maintained between fictional character construction, narrative representation, and the real-life identities of performers

STUDY FINDINGS

Findings of the Study revealed that:

1. The selected Nollywood films contained several forms of multilingual language use, including inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching, English–Nigerian Pidgin switching, English–indigenous-language switching, situational switching, metaphorical/pragmatic switching, and lexical borrowing. English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa were particularly important linguistic codes. These switches were influenced by the situation, participants, emotional state, and communicative purpose of the characters.
2. The study also found that filmmakers used language choice to differentiate characters according to ethnicity, education, occupation, social class, cultural background, authority, and identity. Standard English was associated with educated, professional, formal, or socially privileged characters, while Nigerian Pidgin was commonly associated with informality, street identity, familiarity, humour, and working-class experience. The use of indigenous languages also strengthened characters' ethnic and cultural identities, while switching between English and indigenous languages portrayed bicultural or multicultural identities.
3. Multilingual language choices communicated solidarity, intimacy, authority, resistance, respect, social distance, familiarity, and power. Characters often shifted languages according to whom they were addressing and the nature of their relationship. For instance, switching to Nigerian Pidgin could reduce social distance and create solidarity, while the use of formal English in hierarchical settings could reinforce authority and social status. Indigenous-language switching frequently strengthened familial closeness and cultural respect.
4. Finally, it was observed that multilingual dialogue enabled Nollywood to represent Nigeria's cultural and linguistic diversity while simultaneously reflecting changing Nigerian identities. Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous languages represented ethnic belonging, cultural heritage, tradition, and authenticity; Nigerian Pidgin represented popular, urban, inclusive, and contemporary Nigerian identity; while English represented modernity, education, institutional authority, and wider accessibility.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study established that multilingualism and code-switching in selected Nollywood films served as important narrative and sociolinguistic resources rather than merely reflecting Nigeria's multilingual environment. The findings demonstrated that filmmakers strategically employed English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous languages to construct characters, express emotions, establish social relationships, communicate power and solidarity, and represent ethnic and cultural identities. The study further concluded that language choices reflected the interaction between tradition and modernity, as well as between local cultural authenticity and the need for wider accessibility. Thus, multilingual dialogue significantly enhanced

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characterization and enabled Nollywood to portray the complex linguistic, cultural, and social realities of contemporary Nigerian society.

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nollywood filmmakers should adopt strategic multilingual language use by deliberately employing English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous languages where appropriate to strengthen characterization, express emotions, establish relationships, and communicate social meanings. Language choices should be guided by the character, setting, relationship, and communicative situation.
2. Filmmakers and screenwriters should promote indigenous languages and cultural authenticity by incorporating indigenous languages meaningfully into film narratives rather than relying excessively on English. This would strengthen the representation of Nigeria's ethnic and cultural diversity, preserve linguistic heritage, and enable films to reflect the realities of contemporary Nigerian identities.
3. Film producers, translators, and subtitlers should balance cultural authenticity with wider audience accessibility. Since English provides broader accessibility while indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin enhance cultural specificity, appropriate subtitling and translation should be employed to make multilingual films accessible to national and international audiences without eliminating the cultural meanings conveyed through language choice.

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