

CODE SWITCHING AS A POLITICAL ACT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines code-switching as a political act in Kano State, Nigeria, where multilingual communication is a common feature of everyday life and public interaction. The study was motivated by the need to move beyond the general sociolinguistic treatment of code-switching and to explore its political significance in relation to persuasion, identity construction, audience connection, and power. Two objectives guided the study: to examine the communicative functions of code-switching in multilingual interaction and political discourse, and to analyze how and why code-switching operates as a political act in contemporary public communication. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design. A purposive sample of 20 participants was selected from Kano residents who were familiar with multilingual communication and political discourse. Data were collected through open-ended interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that code-switching performs important communicative functions such as enhancing understanding of political messages, creating closeness and solidarity with audiences, reaching diverse language groups, making speeches more persuasive, reflecting shared identity, and emphasizing important points. The study also found that code-switching functions as a political act by helping politicians win support, construct ethnic or group identity, show solidarity, persuade listeners, include or exclude audiences, and project grassroots leadership. The study concludes that code-switching is not merely a linguistic habit but a deliberate communicative and political strategy through which meanings, relationships, and power are negotiated in multilingual societies. It recommends that political actors use code-switching responsibly and that further studies should expand research on language and politics in multilingual settings such as Kano.

Keywords: Code-switching, Political act, Multilingualism, Language and politics, Persuasion.

Introduction

Code-switching refers to the alternation of two or more languages, language varieties, or codes within a single interaction, utterance, or communicative event. In multilingual societies, it is a normal and meaningful communicative practice rather than evidence of linguistic deficiency. Recent studies show that code-switching is shaped by speakers' communicative needs, social identities, contextual demands, and interactional goals. For example, Mona (2024) describes code-switching as a versatile linguistic strategy through which multilingual speakers respond to different communicative situations while expressing social identity and cultural affiliation. In a similar vein, Muntendam (2024) notes that code-switching is embedded in everyday multilingual life and should be understood as part of how speakers organize information and interaction across languages. This suggests that code-switching is not merely a matter of linguistic structure; it is also a social practice through which speakers negotiate relationships, belonging, and meaning in context.

The importance of code-switching becomes especially clear in multilingual contact settings such as schools, worship centres, media spaces, rallies, and markets. In these environments, communication is often shaped by practical needs, shared background knowledge, accommodation, and social belonging. Research on market interaction indicates that code-switching helps interlocutors manage conversational sequence, turn-taking, negotiation, and transactional outcomes. Muhamna (2023), for instance, shows that code-switching in market interaction functions as a communicative strategy that affects the sequence and outcome of trader–buyer conversations. In the Nigerian context, Aboki et al. (2024) report that Mambila/Hausa bilinguals code-switch in schools, markets, political rallies, and worship centres, often to include or exclude participants, reinforce social identification, or meet interactional needs. A 2019 study on Hausa–Kanuri code-switching also cites earlier evidence from Sabon Gari–Yankura Market in Kano, where traders reportedly switched codes for ease of communication, social interaction, and a sense of belonging. In a multilingual urban centre such as Kano, where Hausa, English, Nigerian Pidgin, and other languages may intersect in commercial and public life, code-switching is therefore part of everyday communicative competence and social negotiation.

When this everyday multilingual practice enters political communication, its significance deepens. Politics depends heavily on language because political actors must persuade, mobilize, legitimize, frame issues, and construct collective identities. Code-switching becomes politically salient when a speaker alternates codes to connect with specific constituencies, express solidarity, signal cultural competence, or communicate ideology. Moody and Eslami (2020) argue that code-switching in political discourse can cultivate political favor, forge alliances, and demonstrate cultural similarity between politicians and multilingual voters. Their study further shows that code-switching in

campaign discourse was used prominently for solidarity, repetition, and message accessibility. In the Nigerian setting, Akinsanya and Obumneke (2025) find that code-switching in political campaign advertisements works together with other semiotic resources to woo electoral support, project party identity, and create a sense of group membership among audiences. In the same broad area of Nigerian campaign discourse, Agho (2025) demonstrates that linguistic choices in campaign speeches are central to persuasion, ideological framing, and leadership construction. Taken together, these studies show that code-switching in politics is not random; it is often a deliberate rhetorical resource for reaching diverse audiences and shaping political meaning.

Code-switching should therefore be understood as a political act because it is tied to choice, audience design, access, representation, and power. Political acts are not limited to voting, legislating, or party competition; they also include symbolic and discursive practices through which power is negotiated and publics are addressed. In official communication, the choice of one language over another may include some citizens while marginalizing others. This is why language politics matters. Rudwick et al. (2021), in their analysis of official COVID-19 speeches in South Africa, show that increased use of code-switching, translanguaging, and African languages had important implications for language politics and social justice, particularly because reliance on English alone excluded citizens who were not proficient in it. Their argument demonstrates that multilingual official discourse is not simply stylistic; it is political because it affects participation, access, and the linguistic terms on which citizenship is experienced. Similar dynamics are visible in Nigerian political discourse, where language functions not only to present policy positions but also to construct leadership identity, appeal to voters, and frame ideological alignment (Agho, 2025; Rudwick et al., 2021).

The problem that motivates this paper is that code-switching is often discussed in broad sociolinguistic terms, while its political force remains comparatively underexplored, especially in relation to multilingual Nigerian public life. Many studies acknowledge that code-switching aids communication, identity expression, and social cohesion, yet fewer studies explicitly frame it as a political act that can include, persuade, manipulate, or symbolically align speakers with particular communities and agendas. At the same time, political discourse research in Nigeria shows that linguistic choices are central to persuasion, ideological projection, and voter influence. Oparinde et al. (2021) demonstrate that Nigerian politicians strategically deploy rhetorical choices to manipulate, persuade, and position themselves favorably before the electorate, while Agho (2025) shows how campaign speech structures are used to frame candidates as credible and relatable leaders. In this context, code-switching deserves closer attention as part of political strategy rather than as a secondary stylistic feature. There is therefore a need to synthesize recent scholarship in order to clarify how code-switching moves from everyday communicative practice, such as that observed in markets and multilingual interaction, into the realm of political action and political meaning.

Guided by this problem, the study pursues two objectives: first, to examine the communicative functions of code-switching in multilingual interaction and political discourse; and second, to analyze how and why code-switching operates as a political act in contemporary public communication.

Conceptual Framework

Multilingualism

Multilingualism refers to the ability of an individual, community, or society to use two or more languages effectively. It is a broad concept that goes beyond simply knowing many languages, it involves how languages are learned, used, valued, and managed in real-life contexts. Li Wei (2000) defines multilingualism as the coexistence of multiple languages within an individual or society, emphasizing its dynamic and context-dependent nature. The types are Individual multilingualism is when a person can communicate in multiple languages, Colin Baker (2011) notes that individual multilingualism varies in proficiency, function, and context of use. According to Joshua Fishman (1972), societal multilingualism often involves functional distribution of languages, where different languages are used in different domains such as education, religion, or government. Multilingualism is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that encompasses linguistic, cognitive, social, and cultural dimension, it should be understood not as an integrated communicative competence shaped by context and experience.

Code-Switching

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages, dialects, or language varieties within a single interaction, utterance, or communicative event. In multilingual societies, this practice is not random but often reflects communicative intentions, social identity, and contextual demands. Recent scholarship describes code-switching as a flexible strategy through which speakers manage meaning, negotiate belonging, and respond to the needs of specific audiences (Mona, 2024; Muntendam, 2024). In this study, code-switching is viewed not only as a linguistic behavior but also as a social and political resource.

Political Act

A political act may be understood as any deliberate behavior, expression, or communicative move aimed at influencing power relations, mobilizing support, shaping public opinion, or constructing group identity. From this perspective, language choice itself can become political when it is used to

include, persuade, legitimize, or exclude particular audiences. In political discourse, speakers often choose specific languages or codes in order to project solidarity, cultural affiliation, and ideological closeness with listeners (Moody & Eslami, 2020). Thus, the conceptual position of this study is that in a multilingual setting such as Kano, code-switching serves both communicative functions and political purposes. It enhances clarity and accessibility, but it also operates as a strategic tool for persuasion, identity construction, audience alignment, and representation in public communication.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies on code-switching show that the phenomenon is deeply embedded in multilingual interaction and often performs important social and political functions. Aboki et al. (2024), in their study of Mambila-Hausa bilinguals, examined code-switching and code-mixing as functionally motivated sociolinguistic behaviors. According to the abstract of their article, the study investigated the different functions that trigger code-switching among bilingual speakers and explained the nature, purpose, and typologies of such switches. The authors found that code-switching occurred in worship centres, markets, schools, and political rallies, where it was used for inclusion, exclusion, social identification, privacy, and ease of expression. Their study is relevant to the present work because it demonstrates that code-switching in Nigerian multilingual contexts is purposeful and socially meaningful rather than accidental.

Moody and Eslami (2020) empirically examined the relationship between political discourse, code-switching, and ideology. From the abstract of their article, the study illustrates how code-switching can be used by politicians to cultivate political favor, forge alliances, and demonstrate cultural similarities with bilingual and multilingual voters. Their work shows that language alternation in political discourse is not merely conversational, but ideologically loaded and strategically deployed. This study is highly relevant because it directly supports the argument that code-switching functions as a political act, especially where politicians use it to reduce social distance and gain legitimacy among diverse audiences.

Akinsanya and Obumneke (2025) studied code-switching and semiotic modes in Nigerian political campaign advertisements. According to the abstract, the researchers analyzed three presidential campaign advertisements and party logos from the APC, PDP, and LP, together with 200 survey responses, using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods. Their findings indicated that linguistic code-switching and visual strategies such as salience, gaze, and foregrounding were employed to woo electoral support, signal solidarity, project ethnic and religious affiliation, reinforce party identity, and portray candidates positively. However, the study also noted that voters considered the previous performance of leaders, suggesting that multilingual appeal alone does not guarantee trust.

This study is particularly relevant because it places code-switching within the practical realities of Nigerian campaign discourse and shows how it operates rhetorically in electoral politics.

Rudwick et al. (2021) examined the politics of language in official COVID-19 speeches in South Africa. From the abstract, the study analyzed code-switching, translanguaging, and the increased use of African languages in ministerial addresses and argued that multilingual language choices had important implications for language politics and social justice. The authors emphasized that while English functions as a lingua franca, it also excludes citizens who are not proficient in it. Their study therefore shows that code-switching in public discourse can shape access, inclusion, and citizenship. This is relevant to the present study because it broadens the understanding of code-switching as a political act beyond campaign speeches to official public communication.

Taken together, these empirical studies show that code-switching functions across multiple domains such as markets, rallies, campaigns, and official briefings. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that it performs communicative functions such as clarification, accessibility, and solidarity, while also serving political functions such as persuasion, identity construction, alliance-building, and audience inclusion or exclusion. These findings provide strong empirical support for examining code-switching as a political act in Kano.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles. CAT explains how and why speakers adjust their language and communicative behavior during interaction in order to manage social relationships. The theory holds that speakers may converge toward the language of their audience in order to gain approval, reduce social distance, and create solidarity, or they may diverge in order to emphasize distinct identity and maintain group boundaries. Recent overviews of the theory define CAT as a framework for explaining when, how, and why individuals engage in interactional adjustments and how such adjustments are interpreted by listeners (Giles, 2023).

The theory is highly relevant to this study because political speakers in multilingual settings often switch codes in response to audience composition, expectations, and identity politics. In Kano, for instance, a politician may move between Hausa, English, Nigerian Pidgin, or Arabic expressions to appear closer to listeners, show cultural familiarity, or project grassroots belonging. Such shifts can be understood as accommodative strategies meant to improve comprehension, build trust, and increase persuasion. At the same time, politicians may also retain or insert particular codes to mark status, ideology, or group difference. Communication Accommodation Theory is therefore suitable

for explaining code-switching as a political act because it links language choice directly to audience design, solidarity, identity negotiation, and power relations in public communication.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design. The design was considered suitable because the study focused on describing and interpreting how code-switching functions as a political act in Kano without manipulating any variable. Since code switching occurs naturally in everyday communication, public interaction, and political discourse, the design provided an appropriate framework for examining how language is strategically used in political contexts and how such choices are understood within society.

The study was carried out in Kano State, Nigeria, a linguistically and politically active state in northern Nigeria where Hausa, English, Nigerian Pidgin, Arabic expressions, and other indigenous languages are frequently used in markets, political rallies, media discussions, religious gatherings, and community spaces. This multilingual setting made Kano suitable for investigating code switching as a political act. The population of the study comprised residents of Kano who are exposed to multilingual communication and political discourse, including traders, youths, political supporters, students, and other adult community members. From this population, a sample size of 20 participants was selected using purposive sampling. This sampling technique was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to select respondents who were knowledgeable about multilingual interaction and familiar with political communication in Kano.

Data were collected through a qualitative approach using an interview guide containing open-ended questions. The questions focused on participants' views on the role of code switching in political speeches, campaign communication, public meetings, and everyday interaction. The use of open-ended questions allowed respondents to express themselves freely and provide detailed explanations on how and why speakers alternate between languages in political and public settings. Data collection took place in selected locations such as markets, community spaces, and public gathering points where multilingual interaction is common. With participants' consent, responses were recorded through written notes and, where possible, audio recording for accuracy.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were transcribed, read repeatedly, and coded according to emerging ideas related to the objectives of the study. Similar codes were grouped into broader themes such as communication effectiveness, persuasion, solidarity, identity construction, audience connection, inclusion and exclusion, and political strategy. These themes were then interpreted to explain how code switching operates as a political act in Kano. To ensure

trustworthiness, consistency was maintained in administering the interview questions, and participants' responses were carefully compared during analysis. Ethical considerations were also observed by informing participants of the purpose of the study, obtaining their consent, and treating their responses confidentially for academic purposes only.

Results

The results are presented in line with the two objectives of the study. Data were generated from interviews conducted with 20 participants in Kano State. The findings are organized thematically and summarized in frequency tables.

Objective 1: To examine the communicative functions of code-switching in multilingual interaction and political discourse in Kano

Table 1: Respondents' views on the communicative functions of code-switching in Kano political and public interaction

S/N	Identified function of code-switching	Frequency	Percentage
1	Enhances understanding of political messages	6	30%
2	Creates closeness and solidarity with the audience	4	20%
3	Helps politicians reach diverse language groups	3	15%
4	Makes speeches more persuasive and appealing	3	15%
5	Reflects shared identity and cultural belonging	2	10%
6	Used to emphasize important points	2	10%
	Total	20	100%

Field survey (2026)

Table 1 shows that the most common view among respondents was that code-switching enhances understanding of political messages (30%). This suggests that in a multilingual environment such as Kano, speakers alternate between languages mainly to make communication clearer and more accessible. The table also shows that code-switching creates closeness and solidarity with the audience (20%), indicating that language choice helps build social connection between politicians and listeners. Other responses reveal that code-switching is valued for reaching diverse language groups (15%), making speeches more persuasive (15%), reflecting identity and cultural belonging (10%), and emphasizing important points (10%). Overall, the result indicates that code-switching serves important communicative functions in political and public discourse.

Objective 2: To analyze how and why code-switching operates as a political act in contemporary public communication in Kano

Table 2: Respondents' views on how code-switching operates as a political act in Kano

S/N	Political role of code-switching	Frequency	Percentage
1	Used to win support and attract voters	5	25%
2	Used to show solidarity with a particular group	4	20%
3	Used to construct ethnic, religious, or regional identity	3	15%
4	Used to include some audiences and exclude others	3	15%
5	Used as a strategy for persuasion and influence	3	15%
6	Used to project leadership image and grassroots connection	2	10%
Total		20	100%

Field survey (2026)

Table 2 indicates that the highest proportion of respondents (25%) believed that code-switching is used to win support and attract voters. This shows that language alternation is seen not only as a means of communication but also as a deliberate political strategy. Also, 20% of respondents said that code-switching is used to show solidarity with a particular group, meaning that politicians switch languages to identify with their audience and gain trust. Furthermore, 15% of the respondents each noted that code-switching helps in constructing ethnic, religious, or regional identity, including some audiences while excluding others, and persuading and influencing listeners. A smaller proportion (10%) believed that it is used to project leadership image and grassroots connection. These findings suggest that code-switching functions as a political act because it is tied to power, representation, persuasion, and audience alignment.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings is presented in line with the two objectives of the study.

With regard to the first objective, which was to examine the communicative functions of code-switching in multilingual interaction and political discourse in Kano, the findings showed that respondents mainly viewed code-switching as a tool for enhancing understanding of political messages, creating closeness and solidarity with the audience, reaching diverse language groups, making speeches more persuasive, reflecting shared identity, and emphasizing important points. This suggests that in a multilingual environment such as Kano, code-switching is not used randomly;

rather, it performs practical communicative functions that make political messages clearer and more relatable. This finding agrees with Aboki et al. (2024), who found that code-switching among Mambila-Hausa bilinguals is functionally motivated and often used to meet interactional needs, reinforce social identity, and manage communication across different settings. It also supports Muhamna's (2023) view that code-switching in public interaction helps speakers negotiate meaning and improve conversational outcomes. In the same way, Mona (2024) explains that code-switching reflects communicative needs and social identities in multilingual societies. The implication of this finding is that politicians and public speakers in Kano use language alternation to improve comprehension and sustain audience attention across linguistically diverse groups.

Concerning the second objective, which was to analyze how and why code-switching operates as a political act in contemporary public communication in Kano, the findings revealed that respondents saw code-switching as a strategy for winning support, showing solidarity, constructing ethnic or group identity, including some audiences while excluding others, persuading listeners, and projecting a grassroots leadership image. This means that code-switching goes beyond communication and enters the realm of politics because it is tied to power, belonging, influence, and representation. This finding agrees with Moody and Eslami (2020), who argue that code-switching in political discourse can cultivate political favor, forge alliances, and demonstrate cultural similarity between politicians and voters. It also agrees with Akinsanya and Obumneke (2025), who found that code-switching in Nigerian political campaign advertisements is deliberately used to create group membership, attract support, and strengthen audience connection. In addition, Rudwick et al. (2021) support this position by showing that multilingual language choices in official discourse have implications for inclusion, participation, and language politics. These studies confirm that code-switching is a political act because it can shape how leaders are perceived and how audiences are mobilized.

However, the finding also suggests that code-switching may have a selective effect. While it can create inclusion and solidarity among some listeners, it may also distance or exclude those who do not identify with the language choice being used. In this sense, code-switching can be both unifying and divisive depending on the political context and the audience being addressed. This explains why language choice in politics is not neutral, especially in a complex multilingual setting like Kano.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that code-switching is an important communicative and political resource in Kano. The study revealed that code-switching helps speakers make political messages more understandable, persuasive, and socially meaningful in a

multilingual environment. It also showed that code-switching functions as a political act because it is used to build solidarity, attract support, project identity, persuade audiences, and negotiate inclusion and exclusion in public communication. Therefore, code-switching should not be seen merely as a linguistic habit, but as a deliberate strategy through which political meanings, relationships, and power are constructed in society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Political actors in Kano should use code-switching responsibly to promote clarity, inclusion, and effective communication among diverse audiences.
2. Speakers and campaign organizers should be aware that language choice can unite some groups while excluding others, and should therefore avoid using code-switching in ways that deepen division.
3. Researchers should carry out further studies using larger samples and additional instruments such as observation and discourse analysis to deepen understanding of code-switching in Nigerian political contexts.
4. Scholars of language and politics should pay more attention to multilingual settings such as Kano, where everyday language practices strongly influence public persuasion and political participation.
5. Public communication in multilingual communities should be designed in ways that recognize local language realities so that citizens can better understand and engage with political messages.

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