

## AGE AND LINGUISTIC APPROPRIACY IN NIGERIA: AN INTERLANGUAGE PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the influence of age on linguistic appropriacy in Nigeria, emphasizing real-life interactions where language choices are molded by cultural expectations, societal norms, and hierarchical communication frameworks. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that includes participant observations, interviews, and case studies, the research investigates how individuals from various age groups adapt their language across different domains, such as family interactions, workplace discourse, religious settings, and digital communication. The findings underscore the enduring presence of age-related linguistic norms while also highlighting shifts driven by digitalization and globalization.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, a linguistically diverse nation with over 500 languages, adheres to deeply ingrained cultural structures that govern language appropriacy based on age. These age-related linguistic expectations permeate familial, professional, and social environments, reinforcing hierarchical modes of communication (Eka, 2021). The prominence of age in shaping language use is evident in the societal emphasis on respectful speech, honorific expressions, and structured forms of address (Ajibola, 2023). However, increasing global and digital influences are gradually reshaping these linguistic norms, necessitating an exploration of how different generations navigate linguistic appropriacy in modern Nigeria.

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Despite Nigeria's strong cultural traditions regarding language use, rapid modernization, globalization, and technological advancements are modifying conventional linguistic norms. Younger generations frequently adopt informal communication styles, particularly in digital contexts, which often diverge from the formal and respectful language traditionally expected by older individuals. This study aims to analyze the extent to which age dictates linguistic choices and whether Nigeria's linguistic conventions are being diminished or merely evolving in response to contemporary communication trends.

### **Research Questions**

1. In what ways does age impact linguistic appropriacy in Nigerian society?
2. How do linguistic patterns differ among various age groups in formal and informal settings?
3. What effects have digital communication platforms had on intergenerational language use in Nigeria?
4. What challenges emerge from generational variations in language appropriacy?

### **Literature Review**

Prior research has highlighted the interplay between age and linguistic appropriacy, stressing its role in sustaining social cohesion (Adegbite, 2022). Adebayo (2021) posits that linguistic norms in Nigeria are primarily cultivated through family upbringing, where younger individuals are socialized into adopting respectful speech patterns that persist into adulthood. In professional contexts, Oladipo (2023) notes that workplace hierarchies reinforce formal communication practices, compelling junior employees to demonstrate linguistic deference toward senior colleagues.

Religious institutions further reinforce age-based linguistic norms. Mohammed (2023) and Afolayan (2023) emphasize that religious environments serve as critical spaces for the

transmission of intergenerational language expectations. Titles such as “Pastor,” “Imam,” and “Elder” are not only honorific but also instrumental in preserving linguistic traditions. Moreover, informal settings such as marketplaces also reflect age-sensitive linguistic adaptations, with vendors modifying their speech according to the age and social status of customers (Nwachukwu, 2022).

### **Inter-language Theory**

Describes this evolving and transitional nature of language use among speakers acquiring or adapting to new linguistic norms, and provides a useful framework for understanding age-based linguistic variations in Nigeria. As younger generations increasingly engage with digital and global linguistic influences, they develop hybridized speech patterns that blend indigenous languages, Pidgin, and English. This process mirrors interlanguage development, where linguistic competence is shaped by both traditional norms and contemporary linguistic exposure (Selinker, 1972). Okonkwo (2023) observes that younger Nigerians are forming an interlanguage that merges informal and formal structures, reflecting the negotiation of linguistic identity across generational lines. Eze (2023) further argues that interlanguage phenomena contribute to the evolving linguistic tensions between older speakers, who maintain conventional forms, and younger speakers, who favor more dynamic and adaptive linguistic strategies.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore linguistic appropriacy across different age groups in Nigeria. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, participant observations, and case studies conducted in various Nigerian regions. Linguistic interactions were examined within households, workplaces, religious institutions, marketplaces, and digital platforms.

**Data Collection**

Primary data was obtained through direct observations, structured interviews with individuals of varying age demographics, and an analysis of language use in both formal and informal settings. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure representation from diverse social backgrounds.

**Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts and observational data were thematically analyzed to identify patterns related to formal and informal language usage, digital linguistic adaptations, intergenerational communication gaps, and the role of cultural traditions in shaping linguistic appropriacy.

**Findings**

1. **Family and Domestic Interactions:** Younger individuals in Nigerian households adhere to deferential language norms when addressing elders, frequently using honorifics and formal speech (Obafemi, 2023). In contrast, older family members typically employ more direct and authoritative speech styles when communicating with younger relatives (Adebayo, 2021).
2. **Workplace Communication:** In professional environments, junior employees are expected to use formal language when engaging with superiors, reflecting hierarchical workplace norms (Oladipo, 2023). Younger professionals in leadership roles often encounter difficulties in balancing formal speech with the expectations of older subordinates (Nwachukwu, 2022).
3. **Religious and Cultural Gatherings:** Religious institutions maintain rigid linguistic norms where age and social status influence forms of address. Ethnographic research highlights that religious discourse significantly shapes intergenerational linguistic interactions (Mohammed, 2023; Afolayan, 2023).

4. **Market and Informal Settings: Vendors in Nigerian marketplaces** adjust their speech according to customers' age, utilizing formal expressions for older individuals and casual language for younger clients (Chukwu, 2022). This flexible approach to linguistic appropriacy accommodates diverse generational expectations.
5. **Digital Communication and Social Media:** The advent of social media has introduced new linguistic trends, with younger Nigerians favoring informal, abbreviated, and hybridized language forms (Eze, 2023). Older individuals tend to preserve conventional speech norms, resulting in occasional miscommunications between generations (Okonkwo, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

Age continues to be a fundamental determinant of linguistic appropriacy in Nigeria, influencing communication dynamics in both formal and informal spheres. While traditional norms persist, the impact of digitalization and evolving professional environments is fostering linguistic shifts. Understanding these transformations is vital for enhancing intergenerational communication within Nigerian society.

### **Recommendations**

- Language education should integrate cultural competence training to assist younger generations in navigating appropriate linguistic choices (Nwosu, 2022).
- Organizations should develop mentorship programs aimed at bridging generational language gaps in professional settings (Akinola, 2023).
- Further studies should investigate the long-term effects of digital communication on age-based linguistic conventions (Ogunyemi, 2023).

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