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The Benefits of Linguistic Alignment between Traders and Customers in the Gwagwalada Main Market in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT)

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Abstract

Linguistic alignment has increasingly been recognised as a critical communicative resource for facilitating interaction in multilingual societies; however, empirical evidence on its commercial benefits within Nigerian informal markets remains limited. This study examined the benefits of linguistic alignment between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria, through the theoretical lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). A descriptive mixed-method survey design was adopted involving 24 purposively selected participants comprising 12 traders and 12 customers equally drawn from the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba linguistic groups. Quantitative data were generated through a structured questionnaire, while qualitative evidence was obtained through four Focus Group Discussions and ten Key Informant Interviews. The questionnaire demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative data were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically. The findings indicate that linguistic alignment constitutes a routine communicative strategy among traders, with Nigerian Pidgin and Hausa emerging as the dominant accommodation codes. Respondents identified the prevention of misunderstanding, trust building, improved negotiation, enhanced customer service, customer retention and increased business profitability as the major benefits of linguistic accommodation. The qualitative findings further revealed that shared language strengthens interpersonal trust, facilitates cultural understanding, promotes customer loyalty and enhances business expansion. These findings support the convergence principle of Communication Accommodation Theory by demonstrating that linguistic accommodation functions simultaneously as a relational and economic resource within multilingual commercial settings. The study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by extending empirical understanding of linguistic alignment beyond communicative effectiveness to its measurable implications for commercial sustainability in African multilingual markets. It recommends deliberate multilingual capacity development and language-sensitive business communication practices among traders operating in linguistically diverse environments.

Keywords: Linguistic alignment, computational measures, systematic evaluation, customer service and negotiation outcomes.

Introduction

Gwagwalada Main Market is located along the former Radio Nigeria – Phase I Road, behind First Bank, off Kaduna–Lokoja Road, Gwagwalada, in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). It is the epicentre of commercial activity in Gwagwalada, complemented by smaller commercial centres spread across the ten wards that make up the Gwagwalada Area Council. Comprising both open and lock-up shops, the market serves as the largest trading hub for residents as well as traders from neighbouring towns and states. It operates daily between 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., stocking the assortment of goods typical of standard Nigerian markets, and is managed by the Gwagwalada Area Council.

Communication, broadly defined, is the process by which traders and customers exchange information within and beyond business locations to achieve shared commercial goals (Nikolić, 2024). Effective business communication, in this regard, is not incidental; it is deliberately cultivated to build customer confidence, minimize misunderstanding, and sustain the trust on which repeat patronage depends (Aresco, 2024; Martic, 2023). Indeed, empirical evidence from the 2024 State of Business Communication Report indicates that miscommunication remains a costly liability for businesses, underscoring why traders have strong incentives to communicate as clearly and relationally as possible with their customers. Central to this relational communication is the concept of linguistic alignment, which this study defines as the convergence of speech patterns, or linguistic accommodation, between traders and customers in the course of a transaction. Giles (1973), who first propounded the theoretical foundation for this phenomenon, argues that speakers routinely adjust their speech style to reduce or accentuate social distance from their interlocutors. Building on this foundation, Gallois and Giles (2015) further elaborate that such adjustment operates simultaneously at linguistic and psychological levels, allowing speakers to signal solidarity, gain approval, or assert distinctiveness, depending on the interactional goal. Similarly, Xu and Reitter (2015) demonstrate, through computational analysis of conversational corpora, that individuals differ measurably in their propensity to align linguistically with their interlocutors, a finding that lends empirical weight to the claim that linguistic alignment is neither random nor uniform but a patterned communicative behaviour.

In physical market transactions specifically, traders often adjust their language, subtly and sometimes subconsciously, to approximate that of their customers. This accommodation, as Tanimu and Suleiman (2023) observe in their study of Nigerian Pidgin use among traders and buyers at Masaka Market, does more than smooth communication; it also cultivates a shared sense of belonging that traders and customers draw upon in subsequent interactions. Ulik and Nuryanti (2023) similarly note that dialectal and stylistic variation in traditional market speech helps sellers build rapport and attract patronage. Furthermore, Fidrmuc and Fidrmuc (2009) contend, on the basis of trade-flow data, that shared linguistic competence between trading parties is not merely a social nicety but a measurable determinant of trade volume, while Meagher (2003) similarly maintains that linguistic and cultural diversity constitutes a structural challenge that traders in West African markets must continually negotiate to sustain viable commercial relationships. Against this backdrop, it becomes evident that linguistic alignment functions as both a social and an economic strategy: it is the trader's deliberate effort to identify with the customer, secure social approval, and thereby ensure the continuity of trade that underpins business success and growth. This is further reinforced by Odhiambo et al. (2022), who, in their study of the Kenya–Uganda cross-border trade, found that accommodation strategies significantly reduced mistrust and miscommunication between trading parties, thereby easing cross-border commercial exchange.

In view of the foregoing, this study sets out to explore the benefits associated with linguistic alignment between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market, with particular attention to how such alignment promotes cross-cultural understanding, enhances economic empowerment through improved trade returns, and encourages more effective business communication.

Statement of the Problem

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Gwagwalada Main Market, like most urban markets in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory, draws traders and customers from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. This linguistic diversity, while reflecting the cosmopolitan character of the market, also creates a recurring communication challenge: traders and customers who do not share a common language often experience misunderstanding, mistrust, and inefficient bargaining, all of which can weaken commercial relationships and reduce the likelihood of repeat patronage.

Linguistic alignment, the deliberate or subconscious adjustment of speech to match one's interlocutor, has been identified in the literature as a strategy that traders across different market settings use to bridge such communication gaps. However, existing studies on linguistic alignment and accommodation in trading contexts have largely focused on describing the strategies themselves or their role in reducing miscommunication, with comparatively little attention paid to the specific benefits that accrue to traders and customers as a result, particularly in terms of fostering cross-cultural understanding, improving trade returns, and strengthening the overall effectiveness of business communication.

Within the Nigerian context specifically, and in Gwagwalada Main Market in particular, this gap is even more pronounced: no known study has systematically examined how linguistic alignment between traders and customers translates into tangible commercial and social benefits. This absence of empirical evidence leaves a critical question unanswered, namely, what benefits, if any, does linguistic alignment confer on trader-customer interactions in a linguistically diverse market such as Gwagwalada? It is this gap that the present study seeks to address.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

i. To determine whether traders engage in linguistic alignment with their customers in Gwagwalada.Main Market.

ii. To identify the modes of communication and accommodation employed between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market.

iii. To examine the benefits of linguistic alignment between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market.

Research Questions

The study addresses three research questions:

1. Do traders engage in linguistic alignment with their customers in Gwagwalada Main Market?
2. What are the modes of communication and accommodation between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market?
3. What are the benefits of linguistic alignment between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market?

Literature Review

In our daily interactions, be it face-to-face or by digital means, interlocutors knowingly and subconsciously adjust their language to become more similar to their conversational partners. This linguistic adjustment between dialogue partners is key to communication. In business precisely, this deliberate attempt by traders to adjust to the language of customers is known as linguistic alignment or accommodation. Linguistic alignment generally provides insight into the mechanism of human interaction, and in business specifically, it helps to enhance efficiency in communication and express business matters more precisely without misunderstanding. It is also born out of the trader's need to express identification with the customer, as well as to gain social approval from the customer. Linguistic alignment is not only limited to business transactions between buyers and sellers; it also finds expression in family and community life. At the family level, respecting divergent values occasioned by political differences is believed to be among the most influential accommodation strategies. Within the community setting, people adjust their language, dress, and attitudinal behaviours to show commitment to the groups they belong to. As people join new communities, for

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instance, their alignment to the community's linguistic norms signals their willingness to be identified with its members.

In a market with buyers and sellers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, one inevitable problem is communication. This is worsened by an absence of linguistic alignment, which breeds uncertainty, anxiety, and misunderstanding during business transactions. Meagher (2003), writing on transborder trade in West Africa, similarly frames linguistic and cultural diversity as a structural challenge that traders must continually negotiate to sustain commercial relationships. Since traders want to maximize profits and customers want favourable bargaining outcomes, trader-customer linguistic alignment becomes an inevitable survival strategy for avoiding misunderstanding and conflict. This is in concert with Fidrmuc and Fidrmuc (2009), whose gravity-model analysis of EU trade data found that shared language fluency is a significant, measurable determinant of bilateral trade volume, suggesting that the ability to communicate in a common language is not merely convenient but economically consequential.

Empirically, Odhiambo, Losenje, and Indede (2022) examined trader-customer communication survival strategies at the Kenya-Uganda cross-border market in Busia, anchored on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Using a quantitative design with questionnaires analysed via SPSS, the study found that traders and customers employed several accommodation strategies, approximation being the most common, to reduce uncertainty, mistrust, and miscommunication, thereby easing cross-border trade.

In a related but more Nigeria-specific context, Tanimu and Suleiman (2023) examined code-switching among Nigerian Pidgin speakers at Masaka Market in Nasarawa State. Drawing on Dell Hymes' Ethnography of Communication framework, the study observed that traders and buyers of varying gender, age, and educational background converged on Nigerian Pidgin as a shared accommodation code to sustain effective communication in the marketplace, a pattern closely mirroring the linguistic dynamics found in markets such as Gwagwalada.

On the computational side, Xu and Reitter (2015) evaluated and compared measures of linguistic alignment across four corpora, including text data from two online forums. Their extrinsic evaluations showed that both Local Linguistic Alignment (LLA) and Spearman's Correlation Coefficient (SCC) captured significant individual differences in alignment propensity, and they recommended the use of such computational measures to quantify how strongly individuals align at multiple linguistic levels.

Lastly, Ulik and Nuryanti (2023) investigated the use of local language in the Embrio Traditional Market between sellers and buyers, aiming to identify and describe the types of language variation found in their interactions, along with the factors driving that variation. Anchored on Holmes and Wilson's (2017) sociolinguistic framework, the study found that buyers and sellers drew on dialect and formality variation to build rapport, signal belonging, and attract customers.

Deducting from the literature, it is evident that while accommodation and language-variation dynamics in trading contexts have been documented in Kenya, Nigeria, and Indonesia, there remains a dearth of research specifically on the benefits accruing to traders and customers from linguistic alignment in Nigerian urban markets. To fill this gap, the study draws on Communication Accommodation Theory, originally developed by Giles (1973) and substantially elaborated by Gallois and Giles (2015), to provide insight into the benefits derivable from trader-customer linguistic alignment in a setting marked by linguistic multiplicity and cultural asymmetry, such as the Gwagwalada Main Market.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). The theory provides the conceptual mechanism for comprehending the benefits of linguistic alignment between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market. The theory was propounded by Gallois and Giles (2015). According to them, CAT is one of the most pragmatic approaches critical to interpersonal and intergroup communication between speakers of diverse backgrounds whose interdisciplinary nature can be used in analysing studies of language and communication. In addition, Gallois & Giles also believe that CAT emphasizes that interlocuters have abilities to shift both their language and

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paralinguistic cues to meet each others conversational needs. Supporting this theory, Giles (2016) and Wilson (2019) observed that what is central to CAT, is the understanding that speakers of different languages or linguistic backgrounds consciously and unconsciously adjust their communication styles or patterns to align or accommodate others during interactions or transactions for the following reasons:

- To maintain a positive social identity
- To induce social approval
- To promote effective communication goals

What this means in other words is that traders have the tendency to adjust their verbal and nonverbal cues akin to their customs during transactions to satisfy their desires and transactional goals. CAT focused on three fundamental accommodation and non-accommodation strategies:

i. Convergence – individuals' ability to adjust their communication styles in line with their interlocuters to gain social acceptance. (Giles, 2007)
ii. Divergence – an accentuation of speech to emphasize distinction from one interlocuter, showing contrast between group identities (Soliz & Giles 2016).
iii. Maintenance – outright sticking to one's linguistic repertoire even when one is bilingual or multilingual (Casiorek, 2016)

The research leans on the convergence accommodation strategy as it provides the basis for adopting CAT, based on its value in providing theoretical understanding on the beneficial application to situations where people of diverse linguistic backgrounds meet. Put differently, the theory is preferred because of its ability to provide appropriate framework to examine what happens when traders linguistically align with their customers or adjust their languages to become more similar to those of their customers irrespective of the differences in their linguistic backgrounds.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive field survey design to investigate the benefits of linguistic alignment between traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market, Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on participants' communication experiences and perceptions within their natural business environment.

The study was conducted among selected male and female traders and customers in Gwagwalada Main Market. A total of 24 participants, comprising 12 traders and 12 customers, were purposively selected. To ensure adequate linguistic representation, the participants were drawn equally from the three major Nigerian languages—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—with four traders and four customers selected from each linguistic group. A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants based on their regular involvement in buying and selling activities and their ability to communicate in more than one language during market transactions.

Data were collected using three complementary instruments: (i) a structured questionnaire designed to obtain quantitative data on participants' demographic characteristics, linguistic backgrounds, communication patterns, and perceived benefits of linguistic alignment; (ii) a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide used to explore participants' shared experiences regarding linguistic accommodation, involving four FGDs (two with traders and two with customers); and (iii) a Key Informant Interview (KII) schedule used to obtain in-depth accounts from five traders and five customers.

To establish validity, the questionnaire, interview guide, and FGD guide were subjected to face and content validation by experts in Linguistics and Research Methodology. Their recommendations were incorporated before the instruments were administered.

The reliability of the structured questionnaire was established through a pilot study conducted among 20 participants (10 traders and 10 customers) selected from Kubwa Market, Abuja, which possesses characteristics similar to Gwagwalada Main Market but was excluded from the main study. Responses from the pilot study were analysed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.86,

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indicating satisfactory internal consistency and confirming the suitability of the questionnaire for the main study.

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores with Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews were transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated to enhance the credibility of the study by validating survey results with participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The study was in keeping with established humanitarian and academic research protocols and in compliance with ethical considerations for safety, dignity and privacy of respondents. The researcher also ensured the confidentiality of the respondents as well as the protection of their data. No identifying personal data were recorded and participation was entirely voluntary and participants retained the right to withdraw at will without penalty.

Data Analysis and Results

Demographic Data Analysis

Table 1

Distribution of Participants According to Status

Status of Participants	Frequency	%
Traders	12	50%
Customers	12	50%
Total	24	100%

Field Survey, 2026.

From the table above, the participants are 24 in number comprising 12 traders (50%) and 12 customers (50%), showing a balanced representation in the selection of participants according to status.

Table 2

Sex Distribution of Participants

Status of Participants	Frequency	%
Male traders	6	25%
Female traders	6	25%
Male customers	6	25%
Female customers	6	25%
Total	24	100%

Field Survey, 2026.

Table 2 above also shows a balanced and fair representation of the participants with respect to sex. While the selected traders comprised of 6 males and 6 females, the customers were also made up of 6 males and 6 females.

Table 3

Distribution of Participants According to their Linguistic Backgrounds

Status of Participants	Frequency	%
Igbo traders	4	16.66%
Igbo customers	4	16.66%
Hausa traders	4	16.66%

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Hausa customers	4	16.66%
Yoruba traders	4	16.66%
Yoruba customers	4	16.66%
Total	24	100%

Field Survey, 2026.

Table 3 above shows that the participants were selected from the three major Nigerian Languages; Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. From the table, 4 traders and 4 customers were selected from each of the languages, showing another balanced selection of the participants with reference to language their linguistic background.

Table 4

Distribution of Participants According to Typology of Goods Regularly Sold and Bought

Typology of Product	Traders	Customers	%
Food Stuff	2	2	8.33%
Cereals	2	2	8.33%
Meat	2	2	8.33%
Jewelries	2	2	8.33%
Provisions	2	2	8.33%
Soft Drinks	2	2	8.33%
Total	12	12	100%

Note. Field Survey, 2026.

From table 4, above, a wide range of six unrelated items or products were randomly selected to represent the entire items sold and bought in the market. For each item or product, 2 traders and 2 regular customers were evenly selected, amounting to a total population of 24 or 100% of the participants of the study.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Research Question One: Do traders engage in linguistic alignment with their customers in Gwagwalada Main Market?

Table 5

Frequency of Traders' Engagement in Linguistic Alignment

Frequency of Alignment	Number of Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Always	14	58.3%
Often	6	25.0%
Sometimes	3	12.5%
Rarely	1	4.2%
Never	0	0.0%
Total	24	100%

The findings presented in Table 5 indicate that linguistic alignment is a widely adopted communication strategy among traders in Gwagwalada Main Market. A combined 83.3% of respondents reported that they always (58.3%) or often (25.0%) adapt their language to accommodate customers, while only 4.2% reported doing so rarely and none indicated that they never engage in linguistic alignment. This pattern suggests that language accommodation is a routine feature of trader–customer interactions. The high frequency of linguistic alignment underscores traders' recognition of

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adaptive communication as an effective strategy for enhancing mutual understanding, facilitating commercial exchanges, and strengthening customer relationships.

Table 6

Modes of Communication and Accommodation

Primary Mode of Accommodation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Nigerian Pidgin English	11	45.8%
Dominant Regional Language (e.g., Hausa)	7	29.2%
Code-switching / Mixed Languages	4	16.7%
Customer's Specific Native Dialect	2	8.3%
Total	24	100%

The results in Table 6 reveal that Nigerian Pidgin English is the predominant medium of linguistic accommodation (45.8%), followed by dominant regional languages, particularly Hausa (29.2%). Code-switching or mixed-language communication accounted for 16.7%, while the use of customers' specific native dialects constituted only 8.3% of responses. These findings suggest that traders strategically employ widely understood languages to facilitate communication across diverse linguistic groups. The prevalence of Nigerian Pidgin English and Hausa reflects their functional role as common languages for commercial interactions, while code-switching further demonstrates communicative flexibility in meeting customers' linguistic preferences.

Table 7

Perceived Benefits of Linguistic Alignment

Benefit Variable	Mean Score ($\bar{X}$)	Decision
Prevents misunderstanding between parties	3.65	Agree
Promotes customer trust and loyalty	3.58	Agree
Improves negotiation and bargaining outcomes	3.45	Agree
Enhances customer service relationship	3.38	Agree
Increases business profit margins	3.15	Agree

Table 7 shows unanimous agreement among respondents regarding the benefits of linguistic alignment, with all mean scores exceeding the decision criterion. The highest-rated benefit was preventing misunderstandings (M = 3.65), followed by promoting customer trust and loyalty (M = 3.58), improving negotiation and bargaining outcomes (M = 3.45), enhancing customer service relationships (M = 3.38), and increasing business profit margins (M = 3.15). These findings indicate that linguistic alignment contributes significantly to effective communication, stronger customer relationships, improved transactional outcomes, and enhanced business performance. Consequently, linguistic accommodation can be regarded as an important communication strategy for promoting customer satisfaction and sustaining commercial success in multilingual market environments.

Qualitative Analysis Results

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The qualitative data from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis, yielding the following recurrent themes that also collaborated and enriched the survey findings:

Theme 1: Building Strong Business Relationships

One customer said:

"**when a trader speaks my language, I feel more at home with him or her and trust him or her more than a total stranger who does not understand my language and culture".**

In business, effective communication plays important role in establishing strong relationships between traders and customers. For instance, when a trader aligns to speak the language akin to that of his customer, communication becomes more effective and consequently, the relationship becomes more cordial and stronger, creating an atmosphere of trust, bonding and mutual respect. This connection strongly influences customer loyalty that orchestrates repeated patronage.

Theme 2: Prevention of Misunderstanding and Conflicts

All the participants during individual interviews and focus group discussions were unanimous in attesting to the fact that linguistic alignment between traders and customers prevents misunderstanding and conflict during business interactions.

According to both the traders and customers, when a trader speaks the language of the customer, business transactions are conducted without ambiguities. The messages are clearly conveyed and understood without misunderstandings. Again, each party understands the others' real identity and through the understanding, they respect each other's norms and values. In the same vein, shared linguistic background also enables them to address issues and find amicable solutions quickly.

Theme 3: Quality Customer Service

All the customers asserted:

We like patronizing traders with qualitative customer service"

The importance of good or quality customer service in business can never be overemphasized. Good or quality customer service has a way of improving customer relationship and loyalty and in turn impacts positively on business. Since good customer service means serving the customer well, it is believed that it is only a trader who speaks the language of the customer through linguistic alignment that stands a better chance of understanding the identity and culture of the customer as well as his needs that will serve him better. When a customer is well served, his loyalty will be earned and his patronage will be boosted.

Theme 4: Retention of Customer.

One trader said: **"My customers that speak the same language with me hardly buy the good I sell from other shops. They patronize me always".**

In addition to good or improved customer service, linguistic alignment between traders and customers help in retaining customers. This is because the customers through shared languages get as much information as they need and this keeps them coming back again and again for more purchases. By so doing, they choose the seller or trader over and above other competitors in the same market.

Theme 5: Enhancement of Business Growth and Expansion

All the traders agreed that: **"**

Linguistic alignment between them and their customers promote their sales, increase their profit margins and enhance their business growth and expansion.

Generally, embracing linguistic alignment or speaking the language of the customer, goes beyond communicating effectively with the customers to foster an atmosphere where understanding and respecting cultures and languages are viewed as rich tapestries that add value to business. It

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orchestrates deeper understanding of individual identities and cultural nuances needed to tailor marketing techniques to align with customers effectively. The more customers are attracted to a buyer, the more the patronage and the more the turn over. Increase in turn over is a yard stick for measuring business success which almost always translates into business expansion or growth.

Theme 6: Trust building

Three customers affirmed: **"It is easier and more natural to trust one who speaks your language in business than to trust a another who does not speak your language"**

Building trust is one of the most important benefits that acrews from linguistic alignment between traders and customers in business. By aligning to the language a customer understands and speaks, the trader communicates clearly without misunderstanding the core values and attributes that make him trustworthy. He uses the shared medium to convey in simple terms, what the customer should expect in their dealings with regards to his dependency and reliability qualities that stand him out especially in keeping to promises and not wavering in the face of challenges. This clear communication of the capabilities of the trader reduces suspicion and doubt in the mind of the customer and also increases his confidence and trust in the trader.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that linguistic alignment is a strategic communicative practice that significantly shapes trader–customer relationships and commercial outcomes in Gwagwalada Main Market. Rather than functioning merely as a conversational adjustment, linguistic accommodation emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative evidence as a mechanism through which traders establish social proximity, facilitate effective communication and enhance business performance. Interpreted through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), the findings affirm that communicative convergence enables interlocutors to minimise perceived social distance and create conditions conducive to successful interaction (Gallois & Giles, 2015). The present study therefore extends the explanatory value of CAT by demonstrating that convergence in multilingual market settings generates not only interpersonal benefits but also measurable economic outcomes.

The finding that 83.3% of the respondents indicated that traders always or often engage in linguistic alignment confirms that accommodation has become an established communicative norm in Gwagwalada Main Market rather than an occasional interactional strategy. This finding is consistent with Odhiambo et al. (2022), who found that traders and customers in the Kenya–Uganda cross-border market deliberately adopted accommodative communication strategies to minimise uncertainty and facilitate commercial interactions. While Odhiambo et al. primarily interpreted accommodation as a survival strategy for overcoming cross-border communication barriers, the present study broadens this understanding by demonstrating that linguistic alignment also serves as a deliberate customer-retention strategy through which traders cultivate enduring commercial relationships. The interview narratives showing that traders intentionally adapt their language to encourage repeat patronage provide empirical evidence that accommodation functions as both a communicative and a relational investment within multilingual marketplaces.

The predominance of Nigerian Pidgin (45.8%) and Hausa (29.2%) as the principal accommodation codes equally reinforces previous empirical evidence regarding the role of shared linguistic varieties in facilitating commercial communication. This finding corroborates Tanimu and Suleiman (2023), who observed that Nigerian Pidgin serves as an effective lingua franca among traders and customers because of its ability to bridge ethnic and linguistic boundaries within Nigerian markets. Likewise, Ulik and Nuryanti (2023) reported that traders deliberately utilise shared linguistic varieties to establish rapport and attract customers in traditional markets. However, the present study advances these findings by showing that language choice within Gwagwalada Main Market is not simply a matter of communicative convenience but a calculated commercial strategy through which traders maximise accessibility to customers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The frequent use of

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Nigerian Pidgin, Hausa and code-switching therefore reflects the multilingual competence of traders as an adaptive business resource rather than merely a sociolinguistic characteristic of the marketplace.

The quantitative finding that the prevention of misunderstanding recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.65) was strongly reinforced by the qualitative evidence, where both traders and customers unanimously emphasised that shared language eliminates ambiguity during business transactions. Participants consistently explained that communicating in a mutually intelligible language enables both parties to interpret prices, product information, bargaining intentions and culturally embedded expressions more accurately. This finding supports Fidrmuc and Fidrmuc (2009), who argued that common language significantly reduces communication costs and facilitates commercial exchange by lowering transactional uncertainty. Similarly, Xu and Reitter (2015) demonstrated that linguistic alignment enhances communicative coordination between interlocutors by improving conversational predictability. While Xu and Reitter examined linguistic alignment from a computational perspective, the present study provides qualitative evidence explaining why such alignment produces practical commercial advantages within informal market interactions. Consequently, linguistic accommodation should be understood not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a mechanism for improving transactional efficiency.

Another important finding concerns trust building and customer loyalty, which emerged as one of the highest-rated benefits of linguistic alignment (M = 3.58). The interview participants repeatedly associated shared language with honesty, familiarity, cultural affinity and psychological comfort. Customers explained that traders who communicated in their preferred language appeared more approachable, dependable and culturally sensitive than those who did not. This finding agrees with the assumptions of Communication Accommodation Theory, which posits that convergence increases interpersonal attraction and social approval by reducing perceived differences between interlocutors (Gallois & Giles, 2015). It also aligns with Ulik and Nuryanti (2023), who reported that linguistic accommodation strengthens interpersonal rapport between buyers and sellers. However, the present study extends previous scholarship by demonstrating that trust generated through linguistic alignment possesses direct commercial consequences, including repeat patronage, customer referrals and long-term business sustainability. Thus, trust should be conceptualised not merely as a psychological outcome of accommodation but also as an economic asset that contributes to business competitiveness.

The finding that linguistic alignment significantly improves negotiation and bargaining outcomes (M = 3.45) equally reflects the importance of shared language in facilitating commercial decision-making. Respondents explained that negotiations conducted in mutually understood languages become less confrontational, more transparent and easier to conclude because both parties clearly understand each other's expectations. This finding corroborates Odhiambo et al. (2022), whose study showed that accommodation strategies reduced mistrust and facilitated smoother commercial exchanges. Nevertheless, the present study extends their findings by demonstrating that successful bargaining is influenced not only by communicative clarity but also by the relational confidence established through shared linguistic identity. In other words, effective negotiation appears to result from the combined effects of linguistic comprehension and interpersonal trust.

Similarly, respondents agreed that linguistic alignment enhances customer service relationships (M = 3.38). The qualitative findings revealed that traders who understand customers' languages are better positioned to appreciate their cultural expectations, explain product characteristics and respond appropriately to complaints or requests. This finding supports Tanimu and Suleiman (2023), who argued that shared language promotes smoother interactions between traders and buyers. However, whereas previous studies focused primarily on communicative effectiveness, the present study demonstrates that customer service improvement represents a broader relational outcome through which accommodation strengthens customer satisfaction and loyalty. These findings therefore reinforce contemporary service management literature, which recognises effective communication as a prerequisite for sustainable customer relationship management.

Although increased business profit margins (M = 3.15) recorded the lowest mean score among the identified benefits, respondents nevertheless agreed that linguistic alignment contributes positively to business performance. Importantly, the qualitative findings explain that profitability is not an

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immediate consequence of language accommodation itself but rather the cumulative outcome of customer trust, effective negotiation, quality service and repeat patronage. This observation lends further support to Fidrmuc and Fidrmuc (2009), who established that shared language enhances trade performance by facilitating commercial interaction. However, unlike their macroeconomic analysis of international trade, the present study demonstrates at the micro-level how interpersonal linguistic accommodation translates into tangible commercial gains within informal African markets. This constitutes an important empirical contribution by linking sociolinguistic behaviour directly to entrepreneurial sustainability.

Overall, the convergence between the quantitative and qualitative findings considerably strengthens the credibility of the study. Whereas the quantitative evidence establishes the prevalence and perceived benefits of linguistic alignment, the qualitative narratives explain the interactional processes through which those benefits are realised in everyday commercial encounters. This methodological triangulation provides stronger empirical support for Communication Accommodation Theory than would either data source independently. More importantly, the study contributes to the growing literature on language and commerce by demonstrating that linguistic alignment within multilingual African markets should be understood simultaneously as a communicative strategy, a relational resource and a commercial asset. Consequently, the findings extend existing accommodation scholarship beyond interpersonal communication by establishing its practical significance for customer relationship management, market competitiveness and sustainable business development in multilingual informal economies.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that linguistic alignment constitutes a fundamental communicative and commercial resource in multilingual market environments. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, the findings establish that traders in Gwagwalada Main Market deliberately accommodate the linguistic preferences of their customers to facilitate communication, strengthen interpersonal relationships and improve commercial outcomes. Beyond enhancing communicative efficiency, linguistic alignment promotes trust, customer loyalty, effective negotiation, conflict reduction, customer retention and ultimately business sustainability. These findings collectively indicate that language functions not merely as a medium of interaction but as a strategic resource capable of generating measurable social and economic value within informal commercial settings.

The study further validates the explanatory relevance of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) in understanding trader–customer interactions within multilingual African markets. Consistent with the theory's convergence proposition, traders consciously modify their linguistic behaviour to reduce social distance and enhance communicative effectiveness. However, the present study extends the application of CAT beyond its traditional emphasis on interpersonal communication by demonstrating that linguistic convergence also produces tangible commercial outcomes. In this regard, linguistic accommodation should be conceptualised not only as a sociolinguistic strategy but also as an economic asset that contributes to customer satisfaction, market competitiveness and business growth.

The study therefore contributes to the growing body of literature on language and commerce by providing empirical evidence from a Nigerian multilingual market, an area that has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. It establishes that successful commercial exchange within linguistically diverse environments depends not solely on product quality or pricing but also on traders' ability to communicate through linguistically and culturally appropriate interactional practices. Consequently, linguistic alignment emerges as a significant determinant of sustainable trader–customer relationships and an indispensable component of effective business communication in multilingual societies.

Recommendations

The recommendations offered in this study derive directly from the empirical evidence and are intended to strengthen communication practices within multilingual commercial environments.

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1. Institutionalise multilingual communication training for traders
Since the findings demonstrate that linguistic alignment enhances trust, customer service, negotiation outcomes and customer retention, market management authorities, trader associations and relevant government agencies should organise periodic multilingual communication and intercultural competence training for traders. Such programmes should emphasise practical conversational skills in the dominant languages commonly used within the market, particularly Nigerian Pidgin, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.
2. Integrate language competence into entrepreneurship development programmes
Business development agencies, Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) support organisations and entrepreneurship training centres should incorporate multilingual communication and Communication Accommodation Theory principles into entrepreneurial capacity-building programmes. This will enable traders to recognise language competence as a strategic business resource rather than merely a social skill.
3. Promote language-sensitive customer service policies within market associations
Market associations should develop customer-service guidelines that encourage traders to accommodate customers' linguistic preferences wherever practicable. Such policies would foster inclusive commercial interactions, minimise communication barriers and strengthen long-term trader–customer relationships in linguistically heterogeneous markets.
4. Encourage multilingual market information systems
Given the evidence that shared language reduces misunderstanding and facilitates smoother commercial transactions, market authorities should provide multilingual directional signs, public information notices and customer education materials in widely spoken languages within the market. Such initiatives would improve accessibility for customers from diverse linguistic backgrounds while promoting social inclusion.
5. Encourage traders to develop continuous multilingual competence
The findings indicate that multilingual competence provides traders with a competitive advantage through improved communication, customer confidence and repeat patronage. Traders should therefore regard language acquisition as a long-term business investment capable of expanding their customer base, enhancing market competitiveness and supporting sustainable business growth.
6. Extend future research beyond communicative benefits to commercial performance indicators
Future studies should adopt larger and more representative samples across multiple Nigerian markets to examine how linguistic alignment influences measurable business outcomes such as customer satisfaction indices, customer retention rates, sales performance, profitability and long-term business sustainability. Comparative studies involving urban and rural markets as well as cross-border commercial environments would further deepen theoretical understanding of Communication Accommodation Theory within African multilingual economies.

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