

# LANGUAGE CHOICE, CODE-SWITCHING AND CODE-MIXING IN BIASE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines language choice and the twin phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing in a multi-lingual Biase Local Government Area in Cross River State, Nigeria. It looks at the different languages spoken in Biase - from the local languages which serve as mother tongues (MT/L1) to other languages in use in the Local Government Area, including English, Efik and the Nigerian Pidgin (NP). It also looks at options open to the indigenes in the use of all the languages in the area and circumstances that dictate the use of any particular language with another. This paper focuses on the uniqueness of code-switching and code-mixing in Biase which is based on its direction and dimension and the implication of this linguistic behaviour in Biase languages.

**KEYWORDS:** Code-Switching, Code-Mixing, Mother Tongue, Language Interference, Multilingual.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the discussion that follows, it is best to have a clear view of the people and the socio-linguistic area we are referring to. Biase Local Government Area is one of the eighteen (18) Local Government Areas in Cross River State, Nigeria. Geographically, Biase is found within the Cross River basin. It is made up of five (5) clans, namely Ubaghara, Erei, Umon, Egip-Ipa and Ehom. Each clan consists of a number of political units ranging from four (4) to an estimated twenty-four (24) communities (Attoe 1990). Biase has an estimated population of a little over one hundred thousand (100,000) scattered over sixty (60) villages with the greatest concentration in Egip-Ipa clan (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Cross River and Akwa Ibom States Population Bulletin, Statistics Division, Calabar 1983-1990).

The languages of Biase have variously been classified by Fara-class (1989), Williamson and Blench (2000) and Essien (2003) as belonging to the Benue-Congo sub-family of the Niger-Congo larger family. Crozier and Blench (1992) list the Cross River Group to comprise Bendi and Delta-Cross, which together contain the largest number of languages. The Delta-Cross group is further divided into the Lower

Cross and Upper Cross groups of languages. Biase languages fall within the Upper Cross Group.

Biase languages can also be classified in status as minority languages based on demography or numerical strength, development and, to a lesser extent, power/dominance as summarised by Essien (2003).

## 2.0 A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF BIASE

Udoh (2003) observes that Local Government boundaries in Cross River State do not exactly correspond to ethnic group demarcation as a result of which there are very few linguistically homogeneous Local Government Areas. Biase falls under a heterogeneous Local Government Area with Umon, except for Utuma within it, being the only linguistically homogenous clan. Other clans demonstrate purely political groupings with linguistic overlapping (Ugot forthcoming). For example, although the Mmewhu language is spoken in Akpet-Central and Akpet 1, these areas fall under Egip-Ipa clan, which comprises mainly the Nne (Agwagune Cluster) group of languages. Idoma also stands out in the midst of Mmewhu (Ukpet-Ehom Cluster) group of

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languages as Iyongiyong is spoken there. There are six (6) main language groupings in Biase. These include Ubaghara,

Nne (Agwagune cluster), Mmewhu or Mehu (Ukpet-Ehom Cluster), Umon, Isangiyongo and Iyongiyong. See Table 1.

**Table 1: Indigenous Languages Spoken in Biase**

S/N	Language Group/Cluster	Major Towns/Villages (where Language is Spoken)
1	Ubaghara	Biakpan, Ikun, Ugbem, Utuma, Etono 1
2	Nne (Agwagune Cluster) comprising Erei, Abini, Adim (Utum), Abayongo, Etono II, Etono Central and Agwagune	Adim, Abayongo, Ipene, Urugbam, Ibini, Abini, Okurike, Itu-Agwagune, Egbizim, Emomoro, Ibene-Abang.
3	Mmewhu or Mehu (Ukpet-Ehom Cluster)	Akpet-Central, Akpet 1, Ehom, Betem, Igbofia.
4	Isangiyongo	Iwuru.
5	Iyongiyong	Ekpri-Ibami, Akwa-Ibami, Agbangana, Idoma.
6	Umon (There are 24 towns and villages in Umon clan. The language is spoken consistently throughout the clan except in Utuma where Ubaghara is spoken)	Ikot-Ana, Igere, Okpo, Ufut, Amanrang, Bechei, Inurasu, Akpasip, Berekpe, Ikot-Abasi-Aniyom, Umon Island, Enu-Ovai, Ayaba, Ikot-Ogbomdan, Agbana, Gany, Ikot-Okpora, Itan, Bereukpan, Ogodim-Ufan, Ikot Anakaniyam.

Language is not just a symbol of nationalism but also a major badge of ethnicity, that is, racial, cultural or family origins (Stockwell 2002). This is generally so in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria and Biase, in particular. In Biase, apart from the indigenous languages listed in Table 1, other languages are spoken and these include English, Efik, Igbo and the Nigerian Pidgin (NP). Although the existence of many languages would appear to create a barrier to communication, the fact is that the situation has rather created compound bilinguals as everyone is forced to speak several languages hereby making communication easier. Thus, multilingualism is, in fact, an asset, which can aid language choice for different purposes in the nation (Bamgbose 1992) because different languages and varieties are used for different purposes, depending on the situation. Our focus therefore is on the choices that are made in a multilingual situation such as exists in Biase.

### 3.0 LANGUAGE CHOICE IN BIASE

Language choice in Biase is often motivated by extra linguistic factors such as education, religion, the economy, socio-cultural activities, politics and governance and domestic use of the language. These factors determine the choices open to the Biase speakers who may speak any two or more of the languages below fluently. The average Biase individual is a compound bilingual. Apart from the local languages (MT/L1) spoken in Biase, other languages of equal importance are also spoken in the Local Government Area and these include the English Language, the Efik Language, the

Igbo Language (spoken widely in Erei) and the Nigerian Pidgin.

### 3.1 The English Language

English is the official language in Nigeria and by extension in Cross River State and consequently in Biase Local Government Area. The language is used extensively in Biase: it is used formally in administration at the Local Government Headquarters in Akpet-Central; it is used in education, in business, in religion, in the media; and it is used in the many social activities that take place daily in and across the Local Government Area. English is therefore, spoken, in Biase alongside local indigenous languages and serves as a means of communication with not just other Nigerians but the rest of the world. In the multilingual society of Biase, the English Language is the dominant language that enjoys institutional support. We, therefore, refer to it as the official language. It is the language of instruction in schools in the area. Given the heterogeneous nature of the area, English is widely a trade language.

### 3.2 The Efik Language

The Efik language is the major Lower Cross language in Cross River State. It is also the most developed of all Cross River languages (Essien 1990). Besides English, Efik was the lingua franca along the Cross River basin for over a century. It was also a language of religion, which facilitated the spread of Christianity along the Cross River basin. It was the language of trade which served as a major economic tool in

the area from the eighteenth (18<sup>th</sup>) century (Nair 1972). It is recorded that trade between Agwagune and Umon was conducted in Efik as far back as the seventeenth (17<sup>th</sup>) century (King 1844). Efik competes very strongly with NP for the position of L2 in Biase as most indigenes of Biase speak Efik fluently.

### 3.3 The Igbo Language

This is one of Nigeria's three major group languages. The Erei share a common border with the Igbo people at Ohafia and also at Abiriba in neighbouring Abia state. This proximity has resulted in Igbo competing as an L2 with Efik and NP in Erei. The interplay of cultural values among the Igbo and Erei people such as intertribal marriages, sharing of common markets etc facilitated the incursion of Igbo into Biase.

### 3.4 The Nigerian Pidgin (NP)

In spite of its lack of official status in Nigeria or even in Cross River State, NP is spreading and becoming more acceptable within the State as a necessary language of communication. Its acceptability in the State is further enhanced by the heterogeneous nature of the State's sociolinguistic landscape. NP is widely used, even if informally, in politics, in trade and the mass media. It is also used in social interaction. In Biase, NP is used as an essential communication medium: most, if not all, linguistic communities in Biase speak and understand NP. It competes with Efik as a second language (L2) in the Local Government Area. The NP that is spoken is highly versatile, it conveys cultural meaning and values in Biase's multilingual pluralistic society. It is basically the most favourable language of choice in the Local Government Area. The pidgin, according to Todd (1978), is essentially a communication system that develops among people who do not share a common language. Politically, it is viewed as a self-imposed language that cuts across ethnic, cultural, political and psychological barriers (Ejele 2003).

## 4.0 CODE-SWITCHING AND CODE-MIXING IN BIASE

From the options discussed one can see that language choice depends very much on the prevailing situation and the business at hand. There is, however, constant overlapping in language use, again, depending on the prevailing situation in the environment. Essien (1995:271) defines code-switching as "the process by which the speaker or the initiator of speech, changes or

switches from one language or code to another, depending on the situation, audience, subject matter etc." Similar changes in language use may also take place within a sentence. Such a switch is known as code-mixing, which Essien (1995:272) defines as "a language phenomenon in which two codes or languages are used for the same message or communication."

Code-switching and code-mixing, therefore, are commonly expected phenomena, being the expression of the communicative need and adaptability of language, determined by the "bounds of limitless avenues and patterns of social interaction and the unfathomable depth of human creative reservoir" (Adekunle 1990:240) In effect, human beings are always involved in numerous efforts to make language a more effective tool of communication. Code mixing is usually the infusion of single words or items from the donor language into the L1 construction. Code-switching is the lifting of phrasal, clausal or sentential structures. In syntactic terms, code-switching occurs in a discourse which is made up of sentences in languages A and B.

According to Bentahila and Davies (1983) code-switching has sometimes been used to register the bilingual's ability to choose one or the other of these two languages in a particular situation. Code-mixing on the other hand is the random alternation of two languages within a sentence. Pfaff (1983) says this language behaviour is governed by linguistic and sociolinguistic factors. Banjo (1983) calls it language mixing, and that it occurs in a sentence made of elements of languages A and B. Code switching is the result of a speaker's movement from one language or dialect of another language to another. This movement is conditioned by social as well as linguistic constraints. Linguistic constraints are those of proficiency and mastery of both systems. Social constraints are primarily those of topic, situation, participants, education, sex etc. The basic difference between code-switching and code-mixing is the composition of the elements intermingled and the arrangement of such intermingling.

Essien (2000) observes that code-switching in Nigeria should be viewed as a normal sociolinguistic phenomenon in communities in which more than one language or dialect is spoken. As a result of increased trade and communication, Nigerians are speaking other languages. In Biase, one can hardly separate the twin phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing as they are commonly found within the speech community. The twin

phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing are particularly high in Biase owing to the multiplicity of languages/dialects in the Local Government Area coupled with the use of English, Efik, NP and even Igbo.

In Biase, there are coordinate bilinguals and the languages used function independently side by side, expressing distinct backgrounds and ways of life. Code-switching and code-mixing are, therefore, viewed as natural linguistic behaviour of the people. For example, where three parties may understand the common language, English, as long as there are two participants in the speech situation who share a common L1, socio-cultural practice or norm demands that these two speak in their L1 which the third party may not understand. In such a situation code-switching and even code-mixing serve both a linguistic function as well as a socio-cultural one.

1. Pivot Speaker: Tani èdànáǎ? Abìn árá rèm ódòm gá CALCEMCO?  
'Tani, how are things? Are you still working at CALCEMCO?
- Listener A: É.Ódòm énéneb  
'Yes. Work is fine.'
- Pivot Speaker: Peter, it's been a long time. Hope everything's fine?
- Listener B: Perfect, my brother. How is your family?
- Pivot Speaker: Everyone's fine. Tani gwááòá? I haven't seen her in a long while.  
Everyone's fine. 'Tani, what of your wife?' I haven't seen her in a long while.
- Listener A: Úkpòkpòrì.  
'She is fine.'

Source: Agwagune language speakers

Code switching is therefore sanctioned especially by those who do not understand the L1 of the pivot speaker and that of other hearer/listener.

. An equally common type of code-switching takes place as one moves from one environment, place, group or society to another. For example, a Biase child living in Calabar the Cross River State capital with his parents speaks his Biase L1 at home, Efik, English or NP with his classmates at school. A young Biase adult in the University of Calabar would speak his L1 to his fellow students of the same ethnic group, NP to others informally and English to his lecturer as a sign of respect and formality (Okon 2003).

One could have a situation therefore where a child says the same thing in three different languages in the same day.

## 2. At home using the Agwagune language

Sometimes in order not to offend the third party who does not understand the L1, the pivot speaker not only code-switches between the L1 and English for both listeners he may also code-mix for the listener (A) who shares his L1, using both the L1 and English. This way the other listener (B) does not feel completely isolated when the pivot speaker communicates with listener (A). Sometimes, the pivot speaker may feel somewhat embarrassed and may apologize to one or the other party as he moves from one to the other party. However, this kind of bi-dimensional communication is being increasingly understood and accepted as part of sociolinguistic and socio-cultural norms as we try to cope with multilingualism in Biase in particular and Nigeria in general. See example below. Data for the Biase language (Agwagune) have been provided by native speakers.

Nsǎñ jibéjji 'I want to eat'  
At school with his mates using NP  
I wan chop o 'I want to eat'  
At, school to his teacher using SE  
Sir, please I want to eat.

Speakers may often switch for emphasis; or because a word in another language may be more appropriate; or because of their perceptions of the speech situation, changes in content, the linguistic skills of their interlocutors, degrees of intimacy etc. In (3) we see a code mix of Efik, English and Agwagune. Code-mixing involves deliberate mixing of 2 or more languages (as in Biase) without an associated topic change. It is primarily used as a solidarity marker. It requires that the conversants have good knowledge of the grammar of the 2 languages and to be well aware

of societal norms. (Wardhaugh1986) Data have

3. Èmènyènè ìzép, my sister?  
 → 'Do you have any message, my sister?  
 Èmènyènè ìzép, my sister?  
 Efik Agwagune English  
 'Do you have message my sister?'

Code-mixing in Biase may even involve words from other Nigerian languages that have been incorporated into everyday speech in the community as shown in (4)

4. 'Don't do that. Haba, you are very stubborn.'  
 'Don't do that. Haba, you are very stubborn.'  
 English Hausa English

This is a code-mix of English and Hausa (a major Nigerian language which is spoken predominantly in northern states of the country). Haba is commonly used in Nigeria as an exclamation showing disgust. Code-mixing according to Essien (1995: 280) serves a linguistic function for those who cannot immediately find a word or expression in a language and so revert to one they are comfortable with or understand better. Again this serves an intimacy function among friends and relations. This is a socio-psychological function.

5. He died? Èbíábù! → 'He died?!!!'  
 He died? Èbíábù!  
 English Agwagune

Here the translation of Èbíábù is almost meaningless in English. Perhaps it could best be translated as "Good Lord!" However, in its strict sense Èbíábù is the name of a highly placed male association in Agwagune, it is used here to convey ethnic affinity, deep emotion and sympathy. Code-mixing arises from "an inner drive that cannot find a ready expression by remaining within a single language" Lipski (1982:192). However, most code-mixing in Biase is a combination of this "inner drive" and to show solidarity with a speaker, particularly if his L1 is different from yours. By throwing in words from his L1, you show some form of solidarity with him.

This is often reflected in inter-sentential mixing/switching, where the change in language occurs at a clause or sentence boundary.

6. We're going to Mary's house. Mààfu?  
 → 'We're going to Mary's house.'

been provided by native speakers.  
 Will you come?'

We're going to Mary's house. Mààfu?  
 English Agwagune

This is a code-switch of English and Agwagune.

In the same way we have the situation of tag-switching where a stock element in one language (often interlocutory) is joined to an utterance in another language. (Stockwell 2002)

7. It was like that, kè èné? → 'It was like that, not so?'

It was like that, kè èné?  
 English Mmewhu

This is a combination of English and Mmewhu (of Ukpè-Ehom Cluster) in tag-switching.

We also have intra-sentential mixing where words from two or more languages are mixed.

8. Dómè sùfù ìnàng quick, quick, ágóbónì?  
 → 'Tell him to come here quickly, have you heard?'  
 Dómè sùfù ìnàng quick, quick, ágóbónì?  
 Etono Central NP Etono Central

Here we have a code-mix of Nne (spoken in Etono Central), NP and Nne (spoken in Etono Central).

9. Fù áfù lèbè óvèn. I go sell am cheap for you.  
 → 'Come and buy something, I will sell it cheaply to you.'  
 Fù áfù lèbè óvèn. I go sell am cheap for you.  
 Erei NP  
 Come you come buy something.

This is a code-switch from Erei (of Nne/Agwagune Cluster) to NP. The switch from Erei to NP signals a desire by the speaker to communicate with someone he perceives as not sharing his L1 which he spoke initially. His next option is to switch to NP which is widely spoken and understood. He could have switched to Efik but perhaps some non verbal clue in the listener suggested that he may not understand Efik either. It is therefore more appropriate to switch to NP, which is the most neutral, most likely to be understood and least likely to cause offence.

Code-switching in Biase also involves a speaker moving from one domain into another, and changing their codes as a result. This is

referred to as situational code-switching. Thus we have;

10. We have English at two o'clock. Vári jè áfià yèpiá. → 'We have English at two o'clock. Let us go to the market now.'  
We have English at two o'clock. Vári jè áfià yèpiá.

The example here is of a switch from English, the more prestigious of the languages used as a medium of teaching, to Ubaghara, the local intimate language. English is used to discuss the formal announcement of an English class at two o'clock and Ubaghara is used to persuade the listener to go to the market with the speaker, a more intimate activity. However if the speaker is not communicating with a fellow school mate his use of English initially portrays him as a social climber.

(11) could be referred to as metaphorical code-mixing. Metaphorical code-mixing is, thus, a means of changing the perceived context. (Stockwell 2002)

11. I no bin understand that class o. The reaction in the test-tube bin no clear me at all. → 'I did not follow that class. The reaction in the test-tube was not very clear to me.'  
I no bin understand that class o.  
NP

The reaction in the test-tube bin no clear me at all

NP English

Here we have an obvious conversation in NP which switches briefly to Standard English as soon as the formal explanation of a chemistry experiment is to be mentioned. The speaker moves from the domain of the informal to a more formal speech and back to the informal to express his lack of understanding of the lesson taught. Code-mixing in Biase simply draws the urgent need to enrich the vocabulary and expression capacities of our mother tongues.

Sometimes, there is code-switching between indigenous languages of the area. Code-switching from other languages to Agwagune (dialect of Nne) is common as Agwagune is the most central of all the languages spoken in Biase because all others command native speakers' competence in it (Udoh 2003) (Ugot 2008). Thus, the switch in discourse is done as a mark of solidarity, intimacy, formality or as a tool for persuasion. In (12) the switch from Mmewhu to Agwagune by a seller in the open market to prospective female buyers expresses the mark of solidarity and it serves as an emotional tool of persuasion.

12. Mama Gbènyàm úkè. Wákààm fàrèbè óvèn.  
→ 'Mama come and buy something. My sister, come and buy something.'  
Mama Gbènyàm úkè. Wákààm fàrèbè óvèn.  
Mmewhu Agwagune

There is a situation where each speaker may use his own language or dialect in communicating if there is mutual intelligibility between his dialect and others, since there is a dialect continuum in Biase, that is, a situation whereby the spreading of dialects may be mutually intelligible (Ugot forthcoming). Mutual intelligibility in Biase is found among the Nne group or Agwagune Cluster, which includes dialects from Agwagune, Adim (Urum), Erei, Abayongo, Etono II, Etono Central and Abini. The Mmewhu or Mehu Language or Ukpè-Ehom Cluster is mutually intelligible among the people of Akpet I, Akpet Central, Ehom, Betem and Igbofia. See table 1. Four examples have been taken from the Agwagune cluster. Data were collected from native speakers residing in Calabar. Languages used are of the Agwagune cluster or Nne group of languages.

13. Exchange of 'good morning' greetings:
- i) Speaker **A** (Erei): Áyilèni. → 'Good morning.'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): É, ávèni, sòtáyòá (pronounced sòráyá)? → 'Yes, good morning, how are you?' Literally: 'Yes, good morning, what of your body?'  
 Speaker **A**: Sólèkpòkpòli, yáyòá? → 'Well, and you?' Literally: 'Body is strong, what of yours?'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): Ékpòkpòri. → 'Well.' Literally: 'It is strong.'  
 (Agwagune also has sòtékpòkpòri OR sòtámékpòkpòri (pronounced sòrékpòkpòri OR sòràmékpòkpòri). Literally: 'Body is strong.' OR 'My body is strong')
- ii) Speaker **A** (Adim (Urum)): Áwèlèni. → 'Good morning'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): É, ávèni, sòtáyòá? → 'Yes, good morning, how are you?'  
 Speaker **A** (Adim (Urum)): Sólámékpèkpèm, nóè? → 'Well, and you?' Literally: 'My body is strong, what of yours?'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): Ékpòkpòri. → 'Well.'  
 (It is interesting to note that the very expression, ékpèkpèm, exists exactly in Agwagune but it translates to 'it is hard,' OR 'it is difficult.')
- iii) Speaker **A** (Abini): Áyèré. → 'Good morning.'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): É, ávèni, sòtáyòá? → 'Yes, good morning, how are you?'  
 Speaker **A** (Abini): Gbáhágbáhá ètè, nóá? → 'Well, and you?' Literally: 'There is no trouble, what of you?'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): Ékpòkpòri. → 'Well.'  
 (In Agwagune, 'There is no trouble' is translated Gbáhágbáhá èrè. Very literally: 'Trouble, it is not there.')
- iv) Speaker **A** (Etono Central): Áfèré. → 'Good morning.'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): É, ávèni, sòtáyòá? → 'Yes, good morning, how are you?'  
 Speaker **A** (Etono Central): Sòrèm ékpèmlúkpèm, yáyòá? → 'Well, and you?' Literally: 'My body is strong, what of yours?'  
 Speaker **B** (Agwagune): Ékpòkpòri. → 'Well.'

Situations described in (13) are typical as any of the speakers (A) could exchange greetings with Speaker (B) the Agwagune speaker and stick throughout to his own dialect as he is fully aware that the Agwagune speaker (B) understands him. The Agwagune Speaker (B) in turn sticks to his own dialect because he knows very well that he too is understood not just by the other groups in the Agwagune cluster but generally by other languages in Biase. Other speakers however defer to the Agwagune

speaker (if they can communicate fluently in Agwagune. See (12)). If there is any hint of a lack of complete understanding for either speaker, then they abandon their L1s and use either NP or SE or even Efik.

In the examples in (13), it is observed that Agwagune has sounds that occur in free variation. These are allophones of the same phonemes. Hence, [t] of sòt at the end of a word becomes [r] intervocalic when followed by another word. Consequently;

14. sòt + áyò + á → sòráyá?  
 body + your + what of → how are you?

Regressive assimilation occurs in Agwagune, hence the *l* in áyò is assimilated thus becoming more like the *l* sound following it (Ugot 2003).

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

The study has focused on Biase; a Local Government Area in Cross River State in Nigeria. Biase is heterogeneous, multilingual and

its local languages/dialects, like most minority languages in use, are forced to adopt other more aggressive languages for use. We have also looked at the use of these languages in the twin phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing which will continue to feature in our multilingual communities as they perform linguistic, sociolinguistic, socio-psychological and socio-cultural functions.

Biase speakers must be commended for use of their local languages as none of them has been listed as dying or extinct as is the case with Kiong, Bakpinka and Odut once spoken in the present Odukpani and Akamkpa Local Government Areas of Cross River State (Crozier and Blench 1992). A conscious organised strategy by users, government and other agencies must be made to reduce these languages to writing and, therefore, promote scholarship in more minority languages in Nigeria.

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