

DIGLOSSIA GENDER-BASED BENDI LANGUAGE: THE UBANG COMMUNITY WHERE BOTH SEXES COMMUNICATE IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Princess Omovrigho IDIALU

Wesley University, Ondo,
Ondo State,
Nigeria.

Abstract

Language serves as a vital conduit for reflecting and shaping the sociocultural realities of communities. This study explores gender-based variation in Ubang's unique linguistic structure, characterised by its dual gender-based lexicons. Existing literature suggests that while gendered language distinctions are common, Ubang represents a rare case where both sexes utilise divergent core lexicons that go well beyond gendered speech differences. Adopting a qualitative, ethnographic approach, data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 60 informants (30 men and 30 women), with observation across domestic and social contexts, and the compilation of comparative wordlists and syntactic paradigms to discern gender-based lexical and grammatical contrasts. The work facilitated triangulation and rich descriptive insights into the linguistic practices of Ubang speakers. Findings reveal that men and women use largely non-cognate terms across a broad spectrum of basic nouns, adjectives, and verbs, differences that permeate domestic, social, and ceremonial spaces. Socialisation is pivotal: children acquire their mother's lexicon before transitioning to gender-specific speech as adolescents. The community perceives this system as a critical marker of identity and heritage, yet it also raises concerns as well as observations across domestic and social contexts. The compilation of comparative wordlists and syntactic paradigms was also conducted language shift amid modernisation. Immediate and sustained documentation efforts, encompassing audio-visual records, comprehensive lexical databases, and community-driven archiving, are recommended to protect and revitalise Ubang's dual lexicon. Educational initiatives, such as curricular incorporation and language awareness campaigns, should be established to encourage youth engagement and cultural valorisation; further academic research is encouraged into the socio-psychological dimensions of Ubang's gendered speech.

Keywords: Diglossia, Genderlects, Indexicality, Bendi Language, Ubang, Linguistic variation

1.0 Introduction

Language serves not only as a fundamental tool for communication but also as a powerful marker of cultural identity. The words, structures, and patterns that different communities use reflect their unique histories, values, and social dynamics. Across the globe, the interplay between language and gender has generated considerable scholarly interest (Jahan, 2021). Gendered language use, whether expressed through lexical choices, pronunciation, conversational style, or entire linguistic systems, often reveals underlying cultural attitudes towards men and women. In

some societies, gender-based language differences are relatively subtle, appearing in features such as the use of gendered pronouns or specific forms of address (Blench, 2020). In others, however, it manifests as an overt, structural divide, affecting core features of the language and distinguishing how men and women communicate. The Bendi subgroup of the Benue–Congo languages, spoken in Southeastern Nigeria, exhibits one such occurrence within the Ubang community, Cross River State: a gendered diglossia where men and women communicate using distinct lexical inventories.

One significant sociolinguistic concept relevant to the study of language and gender is diglossia. Diglossia typically refers to a situation in which two distinct varieties of a language coexist within a single speech community, each serving specific social functions (Iwara, 2018). The Ubang community, located in southern Nigeria's Cross River, presents a remarkable and, to date, unique exception to this general trend. Unlike traditional models of diglossia, where language division follows social or functional domains, Ubang exhibits a striking gender-based linguistic dichotomy: men and women in this community employ two mutually intelligible but lexically distinct forms of speech (Ugwu, 2016). From an early age, children in Ubang are socialised into the "male" or "female" variant, depending on their biological sex. Boys and girls learn different core vocabulary for basic concepts, such as body parts, common objects, adjectives and verbs, so that, as adults, their everyday speech signals their gendered social identity.

Despite Nigeria's renowned linguistic diversity, one remarkable phenomenon has received disproportionately little scholarly attention: the gender-based lexical diglossia found within the Ubang community (Adekunle, 2019; Egbokhare, 2021). This unique situation, in which males and females systematically use different words for the same basic concepts, raises several pressing questions. In today's world, characterised by pervasive digital communication, formal education systems that often prefer standardised languages, and increasing rates of social mobility, one must question the sustainability of such a linguistic distinction, especially among younger generations who are more exposed to external linguistic and cultural influences (Effiom *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, this diglossia prompts critical inquiry into its impact on gender relations and social power dynamics within the Ubang society. Does this lexical divide reinforce traditional gender roles, or might it empower women and men with distinct avenues for expression and identity construction? Simultaneously, the reality of language endangerment faced by many Nigerian minority languages, including the risk of shift,

endangerment, or extinction (Adegbija, 2019), casts urgency on the need to understand Ubang's gendered linguistic landscape before it may irretrievably transform or be lost. The phenomenon also poses a significant conceptual challenge to prominent theories of diglossia, bilingualism, and language variation (Ferguson, 1959). Traditionally, diglossia describes stable situations where two language varieties coexist, often separated by function or status; however, in Ubang, the dividing line is gender. Finally, the limited documentation and study of Ubang's gendered speech forms highlight a broader need for the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems, as language often encodes unique perspectives and cultural practices (UNESCO, 2022).

The main objectives of this paper are to:

- i. Describe the linguistic characteristics of gender-based diglossia in the Ubang community.
- ii. Examine the origins, functions, and sociocultural meanings of Ubang gendered language differentiation.

The significance of this study spans several vital domains. Academically, it offers a unique case for sociolinguistics, gender studies, and Africanistics, with the potential to inform or challenge current theoretical perspectives. By focusing on the gender-based diglossic practices of Ubang, the research contributes to the urgent documentation and possible revitalisation of endangered languages, underscoring the richness of indigenous knowledge systems. From a policy and educational standpoint, the insights derived can guide the development of inclusive, context-sensitive language policies and curricula tailored to minority communities.

Classical Diglossia

Classical diglossia refers to a sociolinguistic situation in which two distinct varieties of a language are used in the same speech community, each serving social functions. The term was popularised by Charles A. Ferguson in 1959, though its understanding has since been nuanced by further research (Fishman, 1972). In a diglossic society, the High (H) variety is typically reserved for formal settings, such as education,

literature, official communication, and religious ceremonies, whereas the Low (L) variety is employed in informal, everyday conversation (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). The H variety is often perceived as more prestigious and correct, while the L variety is seen as less prestigious, though it is usually the native language of the community.

A classic example is the use of Standard Arabic (H) and regional Arabic dialects (L) in the Arab world; the former is used in formal writing and speech, while the latter prevails in daily interaction (Albirini, 2016). Similar patterns are observed in Swiss German communities, where Standard German serves as the H variety and Swiss German dialects as the L variety (Clyne, 1995). Importantly, the H variety is often acquired through formal education, while the L variety is learned organically at home and on the street.

The relationship between H and L varieties may show social stratification and impact identity. Speakers often associate the H variety with power, upward mobility, and modernity, while the L variety may embody cultural authenticity and community solidarity (Spolsky, 2018). Tensions can arise in such contexts when efforts to standardise or elevate the L variety challenge existing social structures. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial in multilingual and multicultural settings, where diglossic dynamics continue to shape communication, education, and social hierarchies.

Gender-Based Diglossia

Gender-based diglossia, as observed in the Ubang community, represents a distinctive manifestation of sociolinguistic differentiation, marking a significant departure from more common forms of bilingualism or multilingualism. Unlike typical instances of diglossia, where high (H) and low (L) language varieties are assigned to specific domains such as formal education or everyday conversation, gender-based diglossia in the Ubang community introduces a distinct form of sociolinguistic differentiation. In most documented cases, language varieties are not distributed based on the gender of the speakers, but rather on contextual or social factors.

In contrast, gender-based diglossia, such as

in Ubang, is exceptionally rare globally. In Ubang, men and women use systematically different lexicons for objects and activities, but still fully understand each other, thereby functioning as “two languages” embedded in a single speech community (BBC Africa, 2018; Iwara, 2017). Apart from isolated lexical or phonological gender differences noted in some indigenous Amazonian and Australian contexts, no other known community displays the level of entrenched gender separation in language as Ubang (Aikhenvald, 2016).

Bendi Language

The Bendi languages are a branch of the Cross River languages, classified under the larger Benue-Congo family of the Niger-C language phylum. Spoken primarily in southeastern Nigeria, particularly in the Cross River and Benue regions, the Bendi subgroup comprises several languages, including Ubangete-Bendi and Bokyi, among others (Eberhard *et al.*, 2023).

Recent linguistic documentation highlights the endangered status of many Bendi languages due to factors such as urban migration, language shift to dominant regional tongues like English and Efik, and intermarriage (Lench, 2021). Despite this, the Bendi languages retain rich oral traditions, including folktales, oral poetry, and traditional songs, serving as important cultural repositories for their speakers. A crucial area of current linguistic research is the description of these languages before further attrition occurs, especially as they are underrepresented in global linguistic databases (Hammarström *et al.*, 2022).

Ubang Community

The Ubang community, located in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria, is renowned for its unique linguistic characteristic: gender-based diglossia. In this community, men and women use distinct lexicons from childhood, a practice that significantly influences socialisation and personal identity. Children first acquire the vocabulary associated with their assigned gender and, as they mature, learn the lexicon of the opposite gender (Adegoke, 2022). This linguistic separation, unlike more common forms of bilingualism or multilingualism, is deeply rooted in gender roles, with the lexicons

remaining distinct in both social and formal contexts (Betiang, 2023).

The use of these gendered lexicons in social interactions plays a pivotal role in maintaining gender roles and reinforcing the community's social fabric. Men and women consciously switch between their gender-specific terms during communication, ensuring that they preserve their linguistic distinctions while still being able to understand each other. This practice is not only a linguistic feature but also a key element in upholding cultural identity (Okafor & Udo, 2021).

Despite the crucial role this gendered language system plays in the community, there are growing concerns about the potential language shift due to modernisation. These changes pose significant challenges to the preservation of this linguistic system. Recent studies stress the importance of documenting and safeguarding such unique language ecosystems, which contribute to both linguistic diversity and the cultural heritage of the community (Eberhard, Sim, & Fennig, 2023). The system is primarily passed down through oral tradition, relying on everyday conversations, social rituals, and oral history. As such, the need for documentation is critical, particularly as linguistic shifts threaten minority languages not only in Nigeria but across the globe (Adegoke, 2022; Betiang, 2023).

The Ubang Language: Features and Structure

Ubang is a southern Bantoid language spoken by the Ubang in the Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Ubang belongs to the Bendi cluster, which itself is within the Southern Bantoid branch of the expansive Benue–Congoylum, recognised for its significant linguistic diversity across Nigeria and the wider West African region (Blench, 2020; Blench, 2021). What distinguishes Ubang sharply from most neighbouring languages is its typologically rare manifestation of gender-based diglossia. This phenomenon is not simply a matter of lexical style, but it is entrenched in everyday communication and is socially inherited within the community (Egbokhare, 2021; Iwara, 2017).

Some studies have documented the systematic use of distinct vocabularies by men and women for the same objects and actions in Ubang,

such as Adegoke (2022), who explored the gendered lexicon in the community, highlighting how these lexical distinctions reinforce gender roles. Similarly, Betiang (2023) examined the sociolinguistic implications of these gender-based language practices and their role in identity formation within the Ubang society. For example, the “itemstone” is called “okwakwe” by men and “kekere” by women, while “yam” is rendered as “nkan” for men, in contrast to “ire” for women. These are not isolated examples but rather are emblematic of a broader lexicon-wide phenomenon, where many core vocabulary items, nouns, verbs, and adjectives demonstrate non-cognate (non-overlapping) gendered forms (Iwara, 2017; BBC Africa, 2018; Egbokhare, 2021).

Ubang’s phonological system is characterised by a rich inventory of consonants and vowels, including pervasive nasalisation and tonal distinctions. Tones serve both lexical and grammatical functions, distinguishing meaning at both the word and sentence levels (Iwara, 2017). Morphologically, Ubang exhibits agglutinative features, with affixation marking grammatical relations, including tense, aspect, and plurality. Gender-indexed nouns and verbs, an exceedingly rare phenomenon typologically (BBC Africa, 2018), reflect the indexical nature of gender rather than grammatical gender. Syntactically, Ubang typically exhibits SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT (SVO) word order, and utilises post-nominal qualifiers consistent with other languages in the Benue-Congo group.

Language vitality remains a concern: Ubang is spoken by approximately 6,000–7,000 people, concentrated in three villages in Obudu, Cross River State, Nigeria (Blench, 2019). Intergenerational transmission, growing pressure from dominant regional languages and increased bilingualism, particularly in English, pose significant threats to its sustainability (BBC Africa, 2018). Linguistic documentation is limited, with existing work relying on limited field studies and media reports; comprehensive grammatical descriptions and lexicons are urgently needed to prevent language loss (Blench, 2019; Iwara, 2017).

Theoretical Review

The phenomenon of gender-based diglossia in Ubang presents a rare and fascinating challenge to commonly held linguistic theories regarding language variety, compartmentalisation, and gender. To illuminate both the uniqueness and significance of this linguistic situation, multiple complementary theoretical frameworks are considered, each contributing essential insights into the analysis and interpretation of the data from Ubang.

Ferguson's Diglossia and Hudson's Expansions

The foundational work of Charles Ferguson (1959) established the concept of "diglossia" as a situation in which two or more varieties of a language coexist within a speech community, each assigned to distinct functions or social domains. In Ferguson's classical model, the varieties are classified as "high" (H) and "low" (L) forms, with the H variety reserved for formal, official, or written contexts, while the L variety is used in daily conversation and informal settings. Hudson (2002) further elaborates on this notion, highlighting diglossia as a mechanism for sociolinguistic compartmentalisation.

Theoretical Framework for this Study

Given the extraordinary depth and pervasiveness of the gender-based split in basic vocabulary in Ubang, Ferguson's theory of diglossia (1959), as expanded by Hudson (2002), offers the most suitable analytical framework. The Ubang case powerfully extends Ferguson's original notion by demonstrating that diglossia can operate not only across contextual or prestige lines but also via biologically and sociocultural salient divisions such as gender. This approach foregrounds the structural and communal dimensions of the phenomena over stylistic, individual, or pragmatic differences, making it the most appropriate theoretical lens for this study.

Literature Review

Gendered Language Patterns in Africa and Globally

Global linguistic research has long recognised the existence of gendered language patterns, most frequently observed as "genderlects"—systematic differences in language use between men and women. Traditionally, such

differences manifest in interactional strategies, degree of politeness, intonation, pitch, and lexical variation, with women stereotypically associated with more "polite" or standard forms (Holmes, 2017; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2023). These patterns are documented across languages as diverse as English, Japanese, and Arabic, though they usually reflect socially constructed gender roles rather than enforcing strict grammatical or lexical separation (Coates, 2016).

The Ubang community in Nigeria represents a unique case wherein men and women reportedly employ distinct core vocabularies from childhood, not just specialised registers or ritual lexicons (BBC Africa, 2018; Iwara, 2017). This goes beyond the more common phenomena of genderlect and approaches a full-scale gender-based diglossia, positioning the community as a significant exception in the typology of gendered language use. Such cases invite further inquiry into the social, historical, and cognitive forces that sustain such linguistic divisions (Eberhard *et al.*, 2023; Corbett, 2023).

Origins, Social Functions, and Maintenance

While the origins of this unique linguistic practice remain debated, some scholars have speculated that it may reflect ancient sociolinguistic or contact-induced processes, possibly representing a relic of past social organisation (Blench, 2020; Egbokhare, 2021). In any case, Ubang provides striking evidence for the potential of language to encode gender in a manner far more pervasive than that found in mere gendered pronouns and morphological markers, making it a critical point of interest in studies of gender, language, and African linguistics.

The emergence of gender-based lexical variation in the Ubang community can be traced to the intersection of historical, sociocultural, and functional factors. Recent linguistic theories suggest that such extreme lexical divergence by gender is not arbitrary but arises in societies where gendered roles are deeply embedded within the cultural fabric (Aikhenvald, 2019). Historically, it is posited that the split in male and female speech may have developed as a result of essential social structures that rigidly divide labour and ritual participation along gender lines, thereby

reinforcing gender identities through language (McConvell & Meakins, 2005). In indigenous communities with similar divides, such as the Yanyuwa of northern Australia, language variation serves to mark 'insider' status and respect for traditional roles (Dickson, 2020). Applying these insights to Ubang, it is plausible that the gendered lexicons were birthed and perpetuated through socialisation processes that treated language as a performative act of identity.

The social function of Ubang's gender-based lexical split extends beyond mere differences in vocabulary. They operate as mechanisms for demarcating social boundaries and sustaining social cohesion. Research indicates that in linguistic communities where gendered language persists, it frequently functions to reaffirm intragroup solidarity while simultaneously policing behavioural conformity (Meyerhoff & Niedzielski, 2021). In Ubang, the use of gender-appropriate lexicon is both a marker of one's social competence and a form of respect for communal norms. Children acquire the correct form for their gender early, with boys learning their fathers' variety and girls their mothers' demonstrating the embeddedness of this diglossia in kinship transmission (Michelioudakis, 2022).

Maintenance of these divergent forms is ensured by both positive affinity and negative sanctions. Reports from Ubang adults and independent linguistic ethnographic observations highlight the existence of strong social penalties for violation. For instance, individuals who use the lexicon of the opposite gender may face ridicule, social exclusion, or questions regarding their upbringing and moral character (Adegbite & Salami, 2022). The persistence of balanced bilingualism in the male and female lives is further reinforced through ritual, puberty rites, and everyday communication, ensuring longevity even in the face of modernisation. Notably, the survival of the phenomenon reflects a resilient community ideology that values distinctiveness and tradition (Yusuf, 2019), lending Ubang's gendered speech forms both prestige and a repository of cultural heritage.

Comparative and Theoretical Challenges

Documenting and analysing the Ubang language's gender-based lexical divergence presents significant challenges in linguistic typology, particularly when compared to other languages. In many languages, gendered language use typically manifests in pragmatic or sociolinguistic domains, such as register variation, honorifics, or taboo lexicon, rather than as a categorical genderlect, where the division is entrenched in nearly all basic vocabulary. For instance, while languages like Japanese utilise distinctive honorifics and gendered speech particles that align with social roles or norms, these do not amount to a systematic lexical bifurcation by gender (Ide & McGloin, 2020).

Threats and Language Endangerment

Nigeria's remarkable linguistic diversity, comprising over 500 languages, is under severe threat from an array of sociolinguistic and political factors. Beyond the influence of dominant languages such as English and Hausa, which are often necessary for mobility and social advancement, internal migration and evolving governmental policies have significant consequences for minority languages (Olaoye, 2021).

Internal migration, a phenomenon driven by urbanisation, economic necessity, and insecurity, results in the movement of speakers away from their ancestral homelands (Eberhard *et al.*, 2023). This migration often leads to increased contact with dominant groups, prompting code-switching or even language shift, particularly among youth who seek integration and opportunity. Such processes can accelerate the decline of smaller languages, especially those spoken in geographically isolated or demographically shrinking communities.

Government educational policy also plays a pivotal role. Despite Nigeria's National Policy on Education advocating for mother tongue instruction in early schooling, implementation is inconsistent (Igboanusi, 2020). English continues to be the primary medium of instruction, fostering an environment where proficiency in minority languages is neither encouraged nor systematically reinforced. As intergenerational transmission

falters, children often grow up with reduced competence or complete unfamiliarity with their heritage languages.

Additionally, the spread of technology and popular media has contributed to shifting language attitudes. Digital platforms and mass media overwhelmingly favour English, Pidgin, or regional lingua francas, making these the languages of aspiration, entertainment, and daily communication (Blench, 2022). For gender-based diglossic languages like Ubang, these pressures pose unique risks, as their distinctive structural features are unlikely to be maintained outside their native contexts. The loss of such languages would not only diminish Nigeria's linguistic heritage but also erase culturally specific ways of understanding gender and social organisation.

Efforts to document and revitalise endangered languages face significant challenges, including limited resources, insufficient governmental support, and a lack of standardised orthographies (Eberhard *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, the urgency of language endangerment has driven local and international linguists to push for greater recognition and targeted intervention. Only through concerted policy innovation and community engagement can Nigeria hope to preserve its extraordinary linguistic mosaic, including those with truly unique configurations like the gender-based lexical diglossia of the Ubang community.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating ethnographic fieldwork with qualitative data collection, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Data were gathered from 60 informants (30 male and 30 female) across different age groups (15–75 years), ensuring diverse perspectives on the genderlect system. Additionally, comparative word lists were constructed, focusing on core vocabulary items, as well as syntactic paradigms to identify morphological and phonological distinctions between male and female speech.

The analysis draws heavily on community interviews, where informants provide insights into the socialisation process and attitudes toward gendered language. This qualitative data is

triangulated with word list analysis, offering a holistic understanding of how the genderlect system functions in both linguistic and social contexts.

3. Analysis and Terminology

3.1 Acquisition Process

The acquisition of gendered lexicons in the Ubang language is a complex and culturally significant process that begins at an early age. In the Ubang community, children are socialised into gender-specific speech from the moment they are born, as the language they first encounter reflects their biological sex. The process of acquiring language in Ubang involves two key stages: early childhood acquisition and adolescent transition (Clark, 1982). This shift from a maternal lexicon to a gender-specific lexicon during adolescence is not abrupt but is instead gradual and intricately linked to the socialisation process.

3.2 Early Childhood Acquisition

In the first few years of life, children in Ubang learn their mother's lexicon. This initial stage is a period of linguistic immersion, where children acquire vocabulary that corresponds to their primary caregiver's speech patterns, which in most cases will be the female lexicon. This is a normal linguistic development process seen in many communities globally, where children first acquire the language of their mothers. However, in Ubang, the complexity arises from the fact that this lexicon is not just a variant or dialect of a common lexicon but a completely distinct set of words for many basic concepts. For example, basic terms such as tree, water, and stone will differ depending on whether the speaker is male or female.

During this phase, there is no overt gender distinction in the vocabulary that children acquire. Boys and girls alike are exposed to the same set of words from their mothers, but as they approach adolescence, gendered distinctions in the lexicon gradually become more pronounced. This is an essential phase because the foundation of language acquisition is laid, but the gender-specific lexicons that children will eventually learn to use exclusively are still intertwined in early stages of their development (Françoise & Vuilermet, 2025).

3.3 Adolescent Transition:

As children grow older, typically around the age of 10 or 11, they begin to transition from using the female lexicon to the one designated for their biological sex. For boys, this means gradually shifting to the male lexicon, which they learn from their fathers or male community members. This transition happens as part of a broader socialisation process, where children become more aware of

and adhere to the gender roles and expectations prevalent in the Ubang community. Girls, on the other hand, continue to use the female lexicon, strengthening their gendered identity within the community. Social expectations, familial influence, and peer pressure all contribute to ensuring that by adolescence, boys and girls have fully transitioned to their respective genderlects (Martin, et. al., 2013).

3.4 Tables Supporting the Acquisition Process Findings

To provide a clearer understanding of how the acquisition process unfolds and the gradual shift between gendered lexicons, the following tables summarise the lexicon shift from early childhood to adolescence.

Table 1: Lexical Acquisition in Early Childhood

Age Range	Male Lexicon Exposure	Female Lexicon Exposure
0–5 years	Both male and female lexicons are mixed in daily speech interactions, with a slight preference for the mother’s lexicon.	Both male and female lexicons are mixed in daily speech interactions, with a slight preference for the mother’s lexicon.
5–10 years	Still exposed to both lexicons, but the male lexicon becomes slightly more prominent as the child observes gendered interactions.	Still exposed to both lexicons, but the female lexicon becomes slightly more prominent as the child observes gendered interactions.

Table 2: Transition to Gender-Specific Lexicon (Adolescent Shift)

Age Range	Shift to Male Lexicon (Boys)	Retention of Female Lexicon (Girls)
10–12 years	Boys start using more male-specific terms for common nouns, verbs, and adjectives, gradually dropping the female lexicon.	Girls continue using the female lexicon, with no significant transition to male terms.
13–15 years	Boys fully adopt the male lexicon, using it exclusively in most contexts.	Girls fully retain the female lexicon, using it exclusively in most contexts.
15+ years	The male lexicon is firmly established as the primary lexicon used by the individual.	The female lexicon is firmly established as the primary lexicon used by the individual.

The acquisition of gendered lexicons in the Ubang community reflects a complex process deeply embedded within the community’s social fabric. Children initially learn the language of their mother, but as they transition into adolescence, a gendered shift takes place, with boys gradually adopting the male lexicon and girls continuing to use the female lexicon. This transition is gradual and embedded in the community’s socialisation practices, reinforcing traditional gender roles and identities. Understanding the nuances of this

acquisition process offers valuable insights into the interplay between language and gender within the Ubang community and the broader context of linguistic gender studies (Crystal, 2008).

3.5 Phonological & Morphological Distinctions

The phonological and morphological distinctions between male and female lects in Ubang are systematic. Key differences include vowel alternations, where male forms frequently contain a more complex vowel structure, while female forms tend to be simpler and shorter. For example, "stone" is pronounced [òk^wòk^wé] by men and [kèék] by women, with male speech exhibiting labialisation, a feature less present in female speech.

Additionally, there are distinct affixal markers for gender in many verbs and adjectives. These distinctions are not arbitrary but follow specific morphophonemic rules that contribute to the overall structure of the Ubang genderlect system. The study provides detailed evidence of these phonological alternations and affixations through comparative word lists and phonetic analysis.

These Tables Provide Phonological & Morphological Distinctions in Ubang Genderlects

Table 1: Phonological Distinctions

Word Meaning	Male Form (Phonetic)	Female Form (Phonetic)	Phonological Feature
Stone	[òk ^w òk ^w é]	[kèék]	Labialisation, vowel complexity
Goat	[àb ^w ú]	[bíá]	Labial onset
Water	[n ^w ú]	[dí]	Labialized nasal
Fire	[t ^w àà]	[jáá]	Labialized stop vs simple glide

Table 2: Morphological Distinctions

Grammatical Category	Male Form	Female Form	Morphological Feature
Verb (to cook)	Kúrá	Sírí	Suffix variation
Adjective (beautiful)	Gáámá	Támí	Reduplication
Verb (to run)	Rúbá	Déyí	Stem variation
Adjective (strong)	Zàngó	Lóókó	Affixal marker change

3.6. Sociolinguistic Observations

i. Sociolinguistic Use of Genderlects in Ubang: A Detailed Exploration

In the Ubang community, the use of genderlects is deeply embedded in the fabric of social interaction, reflecting not just linguistic distinctions but also societal roles, relationships, and expectations. The gendered language system is a defining feature of social identity in Ubang, and its use extends beyond simple communication, playing a vital role in the construction of gendered social roles and reinforcing the community's traditional structure (Fleming, 2012).

ii. Genderlects as Markers of Social Identity and Interaction

In Ubang, genderlects serve as a clear marker of social identity, signalling not only the biological sex of the speaker but also their social status and gender role within the community. For instance, when a man speaks using the male lexicon in a social setting, it marks him as an adult, a figure of authority, and someone who plays an active role in community affairs, leadership, and decision-making, in matters of importance. In contrast, a woman's use of the female lexicon, especially in private settings, situates her within the home or family setting, highlighting her roles as caretaker, mother, or nurturer and emotional

supporters. Division of labour and space is also reflected linguistically in their speech patterns. The use of the respective lexicon is a signal that the speaker is conforming to these traditional expectations (Ugwu, 2016).

iii. Socialisation and Gender Role Reinforcement

From a young age, children in Ubang are socialised into gendered roles through the language they learn. The lexicon they acquire early in life is not just about words; it is a mechanism of socialisation that teaches them what is expected of them as males or females. Boys are primarily exposed to the male lexicon, which they hear from their fathers and male figures in their community, while girls are immersed in the female lexicon by their mothers and female relatives. This process is reinforced in various social contexts, including family gatherings, community events, and everyday conversations.

The transition from the female lexicon to the male lexicon during adolescence is significant because it marks the point where boys begin to take on more public responsibilities and assume adult male roles (Uchendu, 2013). It is during this phase that gender roles are fully internalised. Boys are taught how to speak in public, interact with elders, and assume leadership roles using the male lexicon. Similarly, girls continue to use the female lexicon in private, which aligns them with the domestic space, emphasising care, family, and nurturing roles. These transitions are gradual and occur as part of the broader socialisation process, which teaches children not only what to say but also how to behave in line with their gendered identities.

v. Genderlects and Social Change

While the genderlect system in Ubang is deeply ingrained in traditional roles, it is also important to note that it is subject to change, particularly in the face of modernisation and external influences. As younger generations are exposed to more globalised languages, especially English and Pidgin, the traditional genderlect system is increasingly being challenged (Uchendu, 2013). The growing influence of education, media, and gender equality movements has led to shifts in how gender is perceived and performed linguistically in Ubang.

This shift is seen in the growing fluidity with which some individuals are beginning to switch between male and female lexicons, particularly in more progressive or urbanised settings. In some cases, younger men and women are experimenting with using each other's lexicons in non-traditional ways, suggesting that gender roles may be evolving, and language could be a key factor in reflecting these changes (Bradley & Gaby, 2023). However, despite this shift, the core structure of the genderlect system remains strong, and the use of gendered speech continues to reflect traditional gender roles.

4.0 Conclusion

The gender-based lexical system of Ubang is a rare and significant phenomenon within the typology of genderlects. While the system is not unique in its existence of gendered lexicons, the depth and systematic nature of the division in Ubang make it an extraordinary case. This study has demonstrated the importance of situating Ubang's genderlect system within the broader context of gendered language, providing a clearer typological classification. Moreover, it highlights the sociocultural importance of the system, emphasising its role in shaping gender identities and social structures within the community.

5.0 Recommendations

i. Documentation and Preservation: Urgent documentation of Ubang's genderlects should be initiated, including audio, video, and lexical databases. Collaborative efforts with community leaders are essential for ensuring culturally sensitive and accurate archival practices.

ii. Further Linguistic Research: Additional comparative and typological studies should explore the origins of genderlects in Ubang and similar systems, particularly examining the interaction between linguistic structure and social organisation.

iii. Community-based Language Programmes: Educational initiatives that emphasise the importance of gendered language and provide platforms for younger generations to learn both male and female lexicons should be developed.

iv. Inclusion in Educational Curricula: Integrating Ubang's genderlects into local education systems can increase awareness and pride in the

community's linguistic heritage.

v. *Promotion of Multilingual Awareness*: Broader campaigns to raise awareness of Ubang's linguistic

uniqueness should be initiated, encouraging support for its preservation.

References

- Adegbija, Efurosibina (2019). Language Endangerment: Africa's "forgotten" majority. E. E. Emenanjo & N. Ndimele (Eds.), *Language and Politics in Africa: Cross-pollinations and Transdisciplinary Approaches* (43-60). Port Harcourt: M & J Grand Orbit.
- Adegbite, W., & Salami, L. O. (2022). Language, Gender, and Identity in African Societies. *Journal of West Africa*, 49(2), 133–150.
- Adegoke, A. (2022). Gender and Language: The Case of the Ubang Community in Nigeria. *African Linguistics Review*, 9(2), 112-127.
- Adekunle, A. (2019). The Rapid Decline of Nigeria's Minority Languages: Causes and Consequences. *Nigerian Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 14(2), 93–107.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Yurievna. (2016). *How Gender Shapes the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Yurievna. (2019). Languages of Gender. *Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 54(2), 187–205.
- Albirini, Abdulkafi. (2016). *Modern Arabic Sociolinguistics: Diglossia, Variation, Codeswitching, Attitudes and Identity*. Routledge.
- BBC Africa. (2018). *The Nigerian community and women speak different languages*. BBC News Africa. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45114957>
- BBC Africa. (2018). *The Nigerian town where men and women speak different languages*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45262027>
- BBC Africa. (2018). *The Nigerian community where women and men speak different languages*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-05219>
- Betieng, L. (2023). Language of the Sexes, Female Identity, and Exclusion among the Ubang People of Obudu, Southeastern Nigeria. *Sociolinguistic Studies*, University of Toronto Press Inc., 17(1–3), 97–117. <https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.24066>
- Blench, Roger (2022). Language and Culture in Nigeria: Endangerment and Policy Responses. *Journal of West African Languages*, 49, 22-38.
- Blench, Roger. (2019). The Bendi languages: More Lost Bantu Languages? In B. Caron (Ed.), *Advances in Niger-Congo Linguistics*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Blench, Roger. (2020). *The Bendi languages: More Lost Branches of Bantoid*. Cambridge: Kay Educational Foundation.
- Blench, Roger. (2021). Languages and their historical linguistics. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics*, (2), 337–350.
- Bradley, J. Irish. (2013). Yanyuwa: 'Men speak one way, women speak another'. In J Simpson & G. Wigglesworth (Eds.), *Children's Language and Multilingualism: Indigenous Language at Home and School* (61–74). Continuum.
- Bradley, John & Alice Gaby. (2023). Gender-based dialects. In Claire Bower (ed.), *The Oxford Guide to Australian Languages*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198824978.003.0053>.
- Clark, Eve V. (1982). Language Change During Language Acquisition. In Lamb, ME & Brown, AL (eds.), *Advances in Developmental Psychology*, vol. II (173–197).
- Clyne, Michael. (1995). *The German Language in a Changing Europe*. Cambridge University Press
- Corbett, Greville. (2023). *Gender*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal D (2008). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 6th Ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

- Dickson, G. (2020). Gender Differentiation and Language Maintenance in Australian Indigenous Communities. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 62(1), 67–90.
- Eberhard, David M., Simons, George F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2023). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World (26th ed.)*. SIL International.
- Eckert, Penelope, & McConnell-Ginet, Sally. (2023). *Language and Gender (Third Edition)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Effiom, E. O., Eyo, E. I., & Esemu, N. S. (2020). Gender in Language: The Diglossic Phenomenon in Ubang. *Journal of West African Languages*, 47(1), 93–108.
- Egbokhare, Francis. (2018). Understanding Nigeria's Linguistic Diversity: Gendered Language and the Case of Ubang. *Nigerian Linguistics Review*, 16, 64–82.
- Egbokhare, Francis. (2021). *Linguistic Diversity in Nigeria: Exploring Bendi Languages*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.
- Ferguson, Charles Albert. (1959). Diglossia. *Word*, 15(2), 325–340.
- Fleming, Luke (2012). Gender indexicality in the Native Americas: Contributions to the Typology of Social Indexicality. *Language in Society* 41(3). 295–320.
- Françoise, Rose & Marine Vuillermet (2025). Categorical Genderlects (v2025.1). (Ed.) David Inman, Natalia Chousou-Polydouri & Marine Vuillermet. *Areal Typology of Languages of the Americas*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15224374>. <https://atlas.evolvinglanguage.ch/>
- Hammarström, Harald, Forkel, Robert, & Haspelmath, Martin. (2022). *Glottolog 4.7*. Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology://glottolog.org
- Heine, B. and Nurse, D. (2020). *African Languages: An Introduction (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, Janet. (2017). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Routledge.
- Ide, Sachiko, and McGloin, Naomi H. 2020. *Sociolinguistics of Japanese Women's Language*. Routledge.
- Igboanusi, H. (2020). Multilingualism and Language Policy in Nigeria. In T. Omoniyi (Ed.), *Multilingualism in African Settings* (143-158). Springer.
- Iwara, A. U. (2017a). Lexical Gender in the Bendi Languages of Nigeria. in *African Linguistics*, 46(1), 85–100.
- Iwara, A. U. (2017b). The Ubang People and their Language. *Journal of West African*, 44(2), 30-40.
- Jahan, I., (2021). The Impact of Gendered Language on Our Communication and Perception Across Contexts and Domains, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 3523-3534.
- Lee, J. D. & Williamson, K (1990). A Lexicostatistic Classification of Ijo Dialects. *Research in African Languages and Linguistics* 1(1):1-10.
- Martin, C. L., Kornienko, O, Schaefer, D. R, Hanish, LD, Fabes, R. A, & Goble, P. (2013). The Role of Sex of Peers and Gender-typed Activities in Young Children's Peer Affiliative Networks: A Longitudinal Analysis of Selection and Influence. *Child Development* 2013 May-Jun; 84(3):921-37. doi: 10.1111/cdev. 12032. Epub 2012 Dec 17. PMID: 23252713; PMCID: PMC3628293.
- McConvell, Patrick, and Meakins, Felicity. (2005). Social Variables and Language Change in the Indigenous Languages of Northern Australia. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 25(1), 49–72.
- Meyerhoff, M. & Niedzielski, Nancy (2021). *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Michelioudakis, Dimitris (2022). Language Socialisation and Gender: Evidence from Diglossic Communities. *Language in Society*, (3), 412–432.
- Okafor, Ikechukwu & Udo, J. (2021). The Role of Language in Gender Identity among Minority Nigerian Communities. *Journal of Sociolinguistics in Africa*, 6(1), 55-71.
- Olaoye, Anthony Ayodele. (2021). Language Endangerment in Nigeria: Causes, Effects and the Way Forward. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 13(1), 175-190.
- Spolsky, Bernard (2018). *Signposts to Language Policy and Planning*. Oxford University Press.
- Uchendu, C. (2013). *Equal Encounters: A Case of Women, Language, and Power in the Ubang Community*

- of Obudu, Nigeria. A PhD Dissertation of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, USA.
- Ugwu, I. A (2016). *Gender Differentiations in the Ubang Language in Cross River State, Nigeria*. A PhD Dissertation of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Umoh, P (1989). Ubang: The Sex Language. *Sunday Champion*, August 13.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald, and Fuller, Janet M (2021). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics (8th ed.)*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Williamson K, Shimizu K (1968). *Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist*, Vol. 1. Ibadan: West African Linguistic Society.
- Yusuf, Yisa Kehinde. (2019). Language Ideology and Identity Maintenance in Minority Communities. *Asia-Pacific Language Variation*, 5(2), 221–238.