

Language Acquisition and Early Vocabulary by Children of Mixed Parentage in Makurdi

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Abstract

Children of mixed parentage in Makurdi face complex challenges in their journey toward language acquisition, largely due to inconsistent linguistic input and varying parental emphasis in their home environments. This study investigates language acquisition and early vocabulary by children of mixed parentage in Makurdi. Using a descriptive survey design, the research employed purposive sampling of 30 parents and 15 teachers to examine language development patterns through a semi-structured interview. The study adopts the Interactionist Theory of Language Acquisition. The findings reveal that children of mixed parentage progress through universal developmental stages of pre-linguistic (0-12 months), holophrastic (12-18 months), two-word (18-24 months), telegraphic (24-30 months), and complex sentence (30+ months) but exhibit distinctive characteristics shaped by their multilingual environments. Children demonstrate enhanced phonetic discrimination and lexical borrowing from both parental languages, producing simplified forms across English and indigenous languages including Tiv, Igbo, Idoma, Yoruba, Hausa, Igede, and Etulo. The study concludes that language acquisition in children of mixed-parentage follows predictable trajectories while being uniquely enriched by bilingual input. Their early vocabulary reflects strategic deployment of all available linguistic resources. The research emphasises that parental input and linguistic environments are crucial factors shaping bilingual acquisition in mixed-language homes, with implications for supportive bilingual education approaches in multilingual Nigerian contexts. The study recommends among other things that parents from mixed linguistic backgrounds should be encouraged to use both languages consistently and naturally at home

Keywords: Language acquisition, early vocabulary, children, mixed parentage

Introduction

Language is a structured system of communication used by humans to convey meaning, emotions, and intentions. According to Yule (2020), “language is a system of human communication using sounds, symbols, and grammar that is unique to a particular community” (p. 5). This definition underscores the role of language in structuring communication within social groups. Exposure to multiple languages allows individuals to express themselves across diverse linguistic contexts, leading to bilingualism and multilingualism. These linguistic abilities are shaped by sociocultural interactions, education, and environmental exposure.

Language acquisition refers to the natural and gradual process by which individuals, especially children, learn to understand and use language through interaction with their environment. According to Yusuf (2023), language acquisition is the internalisation of linguistic structures through exposure, interaction, and usage within meaningful social contexts (p.42). This definition emphasises that language acquisition is deeply rooted in everyday communication rather than formal instruction. In the context of this study, children of mixed parentage in Makurdi acquire multiple languages by being consistently exposed to diverse linguistic inputs from both parents

and the multilingual community. Their ability to switch between languages and adapt to various communicative situations reflects the subconscious and socially embedded nature of language acquisition.

Children acquire language through a series of developmental stages, each reflecting increasing linguistic complexity. According to Purba and Damanik (2025), these stages include the pre-linguistic stage (0–12 months), where infants engage in cooing and babbling; the holophrastic stage (12–18 months), characterised by single-word utterances conveying complete ideas; the two-word stage (18–24 months), where children begin combining words to form simple sentences; and the telegraphic stage (24–30 months), marked by multi-word expressions that resemble telegrams, omitting less critical words. These stages are influenced by cognitive development and environmental interactions, highlighting the importance of social context in language acquisition. In multilingual settings like Makurdi, children of mixed parentage navigate these stages while being exposed to multiple languages, often leading to unique patterns of bilingual and multilingual development. Their linguistic progression is shaped not only by innate cognitive mechanisms but also by the diverse linguistic inputs from their environment.

The concept of mixed parentage introduces an additional complexity to language acquisition. Nwachukwu (2018) defines mixed parentage as the union between individuals of different linguistic or ethnic backgrounds, which significantly influences the linguistic identity of their offspring. Children born to parents from different linguistic backgrounds often experience simultaneous acquisition, wherein both languages are learned from infancy. For instance, a union between an Igbo man and a Tiv woman exemplifies mixed parentage, naturally fostering a bilingual environment for their children. According to Adeniran (2023), this situation can lead to balanced bilingualism if both languages are equally developed; however, it may result in dominance of one language over the other, depending on environmental and social factors. The linguistic choices made within mixed-parentage households determine the linguistic trajectory of children, affecting their ability to integrate into different sociocultural settings.

Statement of the Problem

Children of mixed parentage in Makurdi face unique and complex challenges in their journey toward bilingual competence, largely due to inconsistent linguistic input and varying

parental emphasis in their home environments. This dynamic frequently results in an imbalanced linguistic outcome, often leading to the dominance or linguistic attrition of one parental language, resulting in a passive understanding rather than active production. These developmental difficulties manifest directly in the children's early vocabulary, as they often struggle with consistent pronunciation, exhibit high rates of code-mixing—blending words from both languages—and may show delayed acquisition of specific vocabulary, signalling underlying complexities in distinguishing and applying their distinct linguistic systems during critical developmental periods.

Broader sociocultural pressures compound this challenge, as many parents deliberately encourage the acquisition of a neutral language, such as English or Pidgin, as the primary language due to its perceived advantages in a multilingual society. While pragmatic, this practice often contributes to a loss of fluency in the parents' native tongues, leading to children retaining only a limited native vocabulary. Crucially, despite the growing number of cross-linguistic families in Makurdi, there is a significant dearth of empirical data specifically detailing the stages at which these children acquire their languages and how their early vocabulary use manifests

within this mixed-language context. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this critical knowledge gap by rigorously investigating these specific acquisition processes and linguistic patterns in Makurdi.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate the linguistic acquisition of children from mixed parentage in Makurdi, by specifically identifying the distinct stages of their language acquisition and analysing the characteristics of their early vocabulary use within mixed-language home environments. The following objectives are to:

- i. identify the stages at which children from mixed parentage acquire language in Makurdi
- ii. analyse early vocabulary use among children from mixed parentage in mixed-language homes in Makurdi.

Conceptual Review

This section provides definitions and explanations of key concepts relevant to this study. These concepts include language, language acquisition, and mixed parentage.

Language

Language has been broadly recognised by scholars as a central mechanism for human communication and intellectual expression. Adegbite (2019) describes language as “a system of

symbols and rules that enables individuals to communicate and convey meaning” (p. 47), highlighting that effective communication depends on shared signs such as sounds, words, and gestures, governed by grammatical conventions. This perspective emphasises the structural and symbolic foundation upon which language operates. In agreement, Odebunmi (2020) defines language as “a structured system of communication that allows individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, and intentions” (p. 113). This view positions language as not only a tool for dialogue but also a medium for articulating internal states, underlining its significance in both personal and social contexts.

Language is often identified as a defining attribute of human beings. Bamgbose (2021) posits that “language is a uniquely human ability to create complex structures that convey a wide range of ideas and emotions” (p. 19). This view underscores the exclusivity of language to humans and its complexity, which allows for nuanced and multidimensional expressions. Baker and Stone (2020) assert that “language is an organised system that humans use to encode information and share knowledge” (p. 89). This portrays language as more than a communicative device; it also serves as a vessel for storing

and transmitting cultural and intellectual heritage across generations.

Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is a complex cognitive process that enables humans to acquire or gain access to language for effective use. According to Chomsky (2014), language acquisition is an innate biological ability that allows humans to acquire and comprehend language systematically from birth. This perspective aligns with the nativist theory, which asserts that humans are born with an inherent language faculty called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Akinbode (2023) notes that language acquisition involves both cognitive and social interactions, where exposure and engagement in linguistic environments play a crucial role. These perspectives underscore the dual influence of biological predisposition and environmental interaction in language learning.

The process of language acquisition occurs in different stages, typically beginning with the pre-linguistic phase. Olanrewaju (2020) explains that infants start acquiring language by recognising phonetic patterns and responding to auditory stimuli, which later develops into meaningful speech. Pinker (2019) states that language development follows a predictable trajectory where babbling transitions into structured speech

as children acquire linguistic rules. This indicates that language acquisition is both systematic and universal, regardless of linguistic background.

Interactionist theorists argue that language acquisition is influenced by both innate capabilities and external social factors. According to Vygotsky (2022), language development is mediated through social interactions, where children acquire linguistic structures by engaging with more proficient speakers. Adesina (2023) asserts that language acquisition is facilitated by communicative exchanges in social settings, emphasising the role of caregivers in modelling linguistic input as opined by the empiricist's theory of language acquisition. This suggests that meaningful interactions play a crucial role in a child's ability to acquire language. A key component of language acquisition is the development of vocabulary and grammar. According to Johnson (2018), children acquire vocabulary by associating words with meanings through repeated exposure and reinforcement. Similarly, Musa (2021) posits that syntax and morphology are gradually internalised as children interact with structured linguistic input. These views highlight the gradual but systematic nature of language learning, influenced by consistent exposure to linguistic stimuli.

Mixed Parentage

The concept of mixed parentage is deeply intertwined with linguistic implications, particularly in multilingual societies. According to Adegbite (2017), mixed parentage refers to a situation where individuals are born to parents of different ethnic, racial, or linguistic backgrounds, which often leads to a complex linguistic identity. Edeh (2020) states that children of mixed parentage frequently navigate between multiple linguistic codes, shaping their cognitive and communicative skills. These definitions highlight the significance of mixed parentage in bilingual or multilingual settings.

Linguistically, mixed parentage presents unique challenges and opportunities for language acquisition. Bamgbose (2018) notes that the linguistic exposure of a child in a mixed-parentage household varies depending on parental language use and community influence. Likewise, Uchenna (2021) asserts that language transmission in such homes often depends on parental dominance, cultural orientation, and socio-political factors. This suggests that children in mixed-parentage households may have varying degrees of bilingual or multilingual competence.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Interactionist Theory as its theoretical framework.

Interactionist Theory emerged with the work of several scholars, most notably Jerome Bruner (1983). Interactionist Theory came as a middle ground between behaviourism and nativism in the mid to late 20th century. Interactionist Theory posits that language acquisition is a complex blend of innate abilities and environmental influence. Lev Vygotsky's work on social learning provided an early foundation, significantly expanded upon by Jerome Bruner, who focused on the social structures supporting language development. These proponents argued that active social engagement is fundamental to how children learn language.

The core tenets of Interactionist theory emphasise the critical role of social interaction in language development, asserting that children actively construct language through communicative exchanges with more capable speakers. This process is facilitated by Child-Directed Speech (CDS), a simplified and often repetitive form of adult communication tailored for children, and through scaffolding, where adults provide guided support to help children achieve higher linguistic competencies. Furthermore, the concept of a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) highlights the importance of the social and cultural context in fostering language

learning, moving beyond a purely internal or external view.

This theoretical framework is relevant to the study of language acquisition and early vocabulary use among children of mixed parentage in Makurdi. It allows for an investigation into how parental input and daily linguistic interactions, preferences, and the overall social dynamic within mixed-language homes shape children's developmental stages and the characteristics of their early vocabulary.

Empirical Review

Anaka (2016) investigated the influence of inter-ethnic marriage and specific variables on children's language acquisition, focusing on how age, peer groups, school, environment, and parental education impact the acquisition of their mother tongue. The study involved surveying 500 Hausa and Yoruba couples and 500 children, alongside oral interviews with 44 children to assess communicative competence. Findings revealed that inter-ethnic marriage and environment significantly influence native language acquisition, while factors like age, peer groups, school, and parental educational attainment had less impact. Crucially, most children, especially those from inter-ethnic couples, demonstrated greater fluency in Hausa than Yoruba. The study concluded that parents are the primary drivers of

children's language acquisition, with other influences like peer groups and school being secondary. It recommended that parents in inter-ethnic homes continue to serve as key language models for their children.

Anaka's study and the current study are related in their shared focus on language acquisition among children from mixed parentage in a Nigerian context. However, they differ significantly in that Anaka's work broadly examines the influence of inter-ethnic marriage and various socio-environmental factors on general mother tongue acquisition across multiple regions, primarily through quantitative surveys. The current study, in contrast, fills a crucial missing gap by delving deeply into the specific stages of language acquisition and analysing the granular characteristics of early vocabulary use within mixed-language homes in Makurdi, providing qualitative insights into the foundational aspects of bilingual development.

Ajim and Dangana (2020) conducted a phonological analysis to investigate the effects of Tiv (L1) interference on English (L2) learning. Their study, guided by theories of interference and transfer, employed a descriptive and observational approach. The Researchers observed Tiv-English learners during oral English lessons and

interactions within school compounds at Cornerstone Academy (2014-2016) and Saviour Model College (2016-2017) in Makurdi, with one researcher also serving as a teacher during these periods. The findings revealed specific instances of L1 interference: the interchangeable Tiv sounds /r/ and /l/ led to the substitution of English /r/ with /l/ (e.g., “radio” pronounced as “ladio”). Furthermore, the absence of English sounds /θ/ and /ð/ in Tiv resulted in learners replacing them with /t/ and /d/ respectively (e.g., “faith” as “fate,” “then” as “den”). The study concluded that while these L1-induced phonological problems are challenging to overcome, they can be minimised through conscious, collaborative efforts from both teachers and learners.

The study of Ajim and Dangana and the current study both investigate language phenomena in Makurdi, but they differ significantly. Ajim and Dangana focused on L1 phonological interference in L2 English learning among older students, using an observational approach. In contrast, the current study explores early language acquisition stages and vocabulary use in mixed-language homes among younger, mixed-parentage children, specifically filling the gap in understanding foundational bilingual development at the word level in Makurdi.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive survey design to conduct a qualitative analysis of language acquisition. The population comprises children of mixed ethnic backgrounds within Makurdi Metropolis, alongside their parents and teachers. Using purposive sampling, the study selected thirty (30) parents and fifteen (15) teachers for their direct insights into children’s language acquisition stages and early vocabulary use. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources; primary data is the children’s speech. Secondary sources, including library-published and unpublished works, journals, and online resources, were utilised to develop data relevant to language acquisition stages. The data then underwent thematic analysis to identify key stages of language acquisition and vocabulary use by children of mixed parentage.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses data on the stages of language development in children of mixed parentage in Makurdi. The data for each stage is provided and analysed in the tables.

Early Pre-linguistic Stage (0–12 months)

At this stage, children begin with reflexive vocalisations (crying, cooing,

babbling) that are common across all language backgrounds. However, the phonetic input from both parents influences early sound preferences. At this

stage, children begin with reflexive vocalisations that are common across all language backgrounds.

Table 1: Early Vocabulary use during the Single-Word/Holophrastic Stage (12–18 months)

Language	Child's (Attempt)	Word	Correct (Adult)	Word	Meaning
English	nana		Banana		I want a banana / That's a banana
English	ba-ba		Bottle		Give me the bottle / My bottle
English	ca		Cat		Look, a cat!
English	wa-wa		Water		I'm thirsty, I want water
Yoruba	om		Omi		Water / I want water
Yoruba	iṣu		iṣu		Yam (a staple food)
Hausa	zo		Zo		Come (as in, "Come here")
Hausa	ruwa		Ruwa		Water / I want water
Tiv	nyan		Nyam		Meat / I want meat
Tiv	de		De		Leave it / Don't touch
Tiv	ya		Mya		I will eat
Tiv	va		Va		come
Tiv	ei		Ei		no
Tiv	ma		Mma		I will drink
Idoma	ibe		Ebe		meat
Idoma	na		Ona		food
Idoma	wa		Yewa		come
Idoma	ne		Ene		mother
Igede	dada		Adida		Father
Igede	nina		Inina		mother
Igede	Ke		Kewe		come
Igede	nyi		Enyi		water
Etulo	la		Ela		meat
Etulo	Lago		Liago		come
Igbo	ga		Iga		go
Igbo	anu		Anu		meat
Igbo	nri		Nri		food

Source: fieldwork, 2025

Table 1, discusses Early Vocabulary Use During the Single-Word/Holophrastic Stage. It highlights children's universal tendency toward phonological simplification (e.g., "nana" for "banana," "om" for "omi") and syllable reduction when producing their first words across various languages like English, Tiv, Idoma, Yoruba, Hausa, Iggede, and Igbo. This stage is distinctly holophrastic, where a single word such as English "ca" ("Look, a cat!") or Hausa "zo" ("Daddy, come here!") conveys a complete thought. Crucially, in mixed-parentage settings,

children often interchangeably use these simplified words across their developing languages—for instance, switching between Tiv "ma-ma" and Idoma "ne" for "mother"—demonstrating their pragmatic competence and emerging awareness of different linguistic codes in their bilingual environment. At this stage, children begin to utter single words that often represent entire thoughts or requests. In bilingual or multilingual settings, these words can be drawn from either parent's language or none.

Table 2: Examples of Code-Mixing at the Two-Word Stage in Mixed-Parentage Children

Dominant Language (English)	Mixed Utterance (Child's Two-Word Combo)	Intended Meaning (Full Sentence Implied)	Languages Mixed (English + Indigenous)
English	Mummy bia	Mummy, come here.	English + Igbo
English	give me <i>aka</i>	Give me your hand.	English + Igbo
English	eat <i>akpu</i>	Come, let's eat akpu (a meal).	English + Igbo
English	two <i>ego</i>	How much are two eggs? (Implied use of 'ego' for egg)	English + Igbo
English	this <i>iyough</i>	Is this yam good?	English + Tiv
English	Chika <i>ihemere</i>	Chika, what happened to you?	English + Igbo
English	Mummy <i>ngerem</i>	Mummy, give me water.	English + Tiv
English	Daddy <i>luam</i>	Daddy, I want food.	English + Tiv
English	Mummy <i>Abakpa</i>	Mummy, I want my slippers.	English + Etulo
English	eat <i>Agumor</i>	Come and eat water yam.	English + Etulo
English	wear <i>ikempe</i>	Wear my pants.	English + Etulo

English	<i>go iga</i>	I want to go.	English + Igbo
English	<i>my nna</i>	That's my father.	English + Igbo
English	<i>new Abina</i>	Look, a new yam.	English + Igala
English	<i>want ruwa</i>	I want water.	English + Hausa
English	<i>my epwa</i>	That's my house.	English + Igede
English	<i>Mummy va</i>	Mummy, come.	English + Tiv
English	<i>no de</i>	Don't leave. / Don't touch it.	English + Tiv
English	<i>want ya</i>	I want to eat.	English + Tiv
English	<i>drink ma</i>	I want to drink.	English + Tiv
Tiv	<i>Ma ẹkọ</i>	"I will drink food (water)."	Tiv + Idoma
Tiv	<i>Va ọkọ</i>	"Come, father."	Tiv + Idoma
Tiv	<i>Ya ibe</i>	"Eat meat."	Tiv + Idoma
Igbo	<i>Nne nyaam</i>	Mother, give me meat.	Igbo + Tiv
Igbo	<i>Nna de</i>	Father, leave it.	Igbo + Tiv
Yoruba	<i>Mama nri</i>	Mama, give me food.	Yoruba + Igbo
Yoruba	<i>Baba anu</i>	Father, give me meat.	Yoruba + Igbo

Source: *fieldwork*, 2025

Table 2 illustrates the phenomenon of code-mixing at the two-word stage among children of mixed parentage, revealing how they blend their dominant language, which is predominantly English, with various indigenous Nigerian languages. The data shows that children consistently combine an English word with a word from their parents' indigenous language to express a complete thought. For instance, utterances like "Mummy bia" (come here) and "give me aka" (hand) demonstrate the fusion of English with Igbo. Similarly, other examples showcase

the mixing of English with Tiv, as seen in "Mummy va" (come) and "want ya" (eat), or with Etulo, Igala, Hausa, and Igede, such as "want ruwa" (water) and "my epwa" (house). The table also indicates instances of mixing among indigenous languages themselves, like "Ya ibe" which combines Tiv and Idoma, or "Mama nri" which mixes Yoruba and Igbo. This demonstrates that children's early linguistic development is a dynamic process where they creatively use words from all available languages to communicate their needs and intentions.

Table 3: Telegraphic Speech Stage (24–30 months) in Mixed-Parentage Children

Dominant Language (or Matrix)	Child's Telegraphic Utterance	Implied Full Sentence / Adult Meaning	Languages Mixed (L1 + L2 + etc.)
English	Mummy come <i>oru</i>	Mummy, come to the kitchen.	English + Igbo
English	Daddy give me <i>aka</i>	Daddy, please give me your hand.	English + Igbo
English	How much <i>ego</i> two?	How much are two eggs?	English + Igbo
English	Big <i>nkita</i> sleep	The big dog is sleeping.	English + Igbo
English	My <i>lilo</i> here	My house is here.	English + Igbo
English	Mummy <i>va</i> home early	Mummy, come home early.	English + Tiv
English	No <i>de</i> this	Don't touch this.	English + Tiv
Tiv-Idoma	Mama <i>ma</i> <i>ekọ</i>	Mama, I will drink food/water.	Tiv + Idoma
Tiv-Idoma	Auntie <i>va</i> <i>okọ</i>	Auntie, come, father. (Addressing an adult, referring to male parent)	Tiv + Idoma
Tiv-Idoma	Baby <i>ya</i> <i>ibe</i>	Baby, eat meat.	Tiv + Idoma
Igede-Idoma	Adida <i>ru</i> <i>enyi</i>	Father, go to the water.	Igede + Idoma
Igede-Idoma	Inina <i>kewe</i> <i>na</i>	Mother, come eat food.	Igede + Idoma
Igbo-Tiv	Nne <i>nyaam</i> now	Mother, give me meat now.	Igbo + Tiv
Igbo-Tiv	Nna <i>de</i> that	Father, leave that.	Igbo + Tiv
Igbo-Tiv	Terpase <i>key</i> <i>ebe</i> <i>ina</i> <i>ga</i>	Terpase, where are you going? (Igbo name + Tiv)	Igbo + Tiv
Yoruba-Igbo	Mama <i>nri</i> finish	Mama, the food is finished.	Yoruba + Igbo
Yoruba-Igbo	Baba <i>anu</i> good	Father, the meat is good.	Yoruba + Igbo

Source: *fieldwork*, 2025

Table 3 clearly illustrates the characteristics of Telegraphic Speech (24–30 months) among mixed-parentage children in Makurdi, demonstrating their progression to combining three or more content words while omitting function words. Crucially, it highlights extensive code-mixing, not only between English and indigenous languages but also between the indigenous languages themselves (e.g.,

Tiv-Idoma, Igede-Idoma, Igbo-Tiv). This fluid integration, such as a Tiv-speaking child saying “Ma *ekọ*” (Tiv + Idoma for “I will drink food/water”) or an Igede-speaking child combining “Adida *ru anyi*” (Igede + Idoma for “Father, go to the water”), underscores children's sophisticated pragmatic strategies. This demonstrates their adaptive use of all available linguistic resources to express

increasingly complex ideas, reflecting a dynamic interplay between their developing language systems rather than confusion.

Table 4: Complex Sentences Stage (30+ months) in Mixed-Parentage Children

Dominant Language (or Matrix)	Child's Complex Utterance (Example)	Implied Full Sentence / Adult Meaning	Languages Mixed (L1 + L2 + etc.)
Igbo-Tiv	Bia weremu alum	Come, give me orange.	Igbo + Tiv
Igbo-Tiv	Orne nyem aka gi	Give me your hand.	Igbo + Tiv
Igbo-Tiv	Bia ka anyi rie <i>akpu</i>	Come, let's eat <i>akpu</i> (a meal).	Igbo + Tiv
Igbo-Tiv	Iyough nkea odi mma?	Is this yam good?	Igbo + Tiv
Igbo-Tiv	Kper m ngu van na isi ututu	Tomorrow I will come early in the morning.	Igbo + Tiv
English-Etulo	Daddy, mummy <i>nani mluam</i>	Daddy, mummy gave me food.	English + Etulo
English-Etulo	Mummy <i>nani Abakpa ohe</i>	My mummy bought new slippers for me.	English + Etulo
English-Etulo	Mka gye <i>ijir</i>	I will eat an egg.	English + Etulo
English-Etulo	Kwagh wa gye <i>Agbó</i>	Come and eat water yam.	English + Etulo
English-Etulo	Wani <i>ikempe</i> now	Wear my pants now.	English + Etulo

Source: *fieldwork, 2025*

Table 4, Complex Sentences Stage (30+ months), illustrates the significant linguistic advancement of mixed-parentage children, who now construct longer and more grammatically nuanced utterances. Unlike the earlier telegraphic speech, these examples often include function words and more complete sentence structures, demonstrating a developing mastery of syntax in their primary and emerging languages. The table vividly showcases continued code-mixing, where entire

phrases or key lexical items from one language are seamlessly integrated into sentences primarily from another, such as Igbo-Tiv blends like “Bia weremu alum” (Come, give me orange). This advanced code-mixing is a hallmark of balanced bilingual development, reflecting children's increasing sophistication in navigating their multi-linguistic environments and strategically deploying their full linguistic repertoire for effective and precise communication.

Table 5: Summary of Stages and Key Features in Mixed Parentage Contexts (Makurdi)

Stage	Age Range	Features	Influence of Mixed Parentage
Pre-linguistic	0–12 months	Cooing, babbling	Early exposure to phonemes from both languages

Holophrastic	12–18 months	Single-word utterances	Lexical borrowing from both parents' languages
Two-word	18–24 months	Basic combinations	Frequent code-mixing; language blending
Telegraphic	24–30 months	Multi-word phrases	Omission of function words; mixed grammar
Complex Speech	30+ months	Full sentences	Development of dominant language and translanguaging

Discussion of Findings

The study found that children of mixed parentage in Makurdi progress through universal stages of language acquisition: pre-linguistic, single-word/holophrastic, two-word/telegraphic, and complex sentence stages, but with distinctive features shaped by their bilingual environments. These findings align with the observations of De Houwer (2020) and Yip and Matthews (2018), who argue that while bilingual children generally follow the same developmental trajectory as monolinguals, their linguistic output is uniquely shaped by the dual input they receive. De Houwer (2020) emphasises that bilingual acquisition is not delayed but enriched, and that code-mixing is a normal developmental phenomenon rather than a sign of confusion or language impairment.

The second objective of the study, focusing on early vocabulary use, revealed that children of mixed parentage in Makurdi employ flexible and creative language strategies from their earliest

utterances. At the single-word stage, they frequently demonstrate universal phonological simplifications, such as shortening “banana” to “nana” or modifying Yoruba’s “omi” (water) to “om.” Despite these simplifications, children convey rich and complete meanings. Notably, code-mixing becomes pervasive from the two-word stage onward. For instance, a child might say “*Mummy va*” (English + Tiv for “Mummy, come”) or “*eat akpu*” (English + Igbo for “eat akpu”). This blending often extends even across indigenous languages—e.g., “*Ma ẹkọ*” (Tiv for “drink” + Idoma for “food”)—to express intentions like “I will drink food.” Such usage reflects not confusion but communicative precision within the bilingual child’s repertoire. This observation supports Genesee and Paradis (2021), who assert that bilingual children’s code-mixing follows systematic grammatical rules from both languages and serves as a strategic communicative

tool rather than a random mix. These strategies demonstrate cognitive flexibility and the children's ability to navigate and negotiate meaning across linguistic boundaries effectively.

Conclusion

This study concludes that these children follow universal developmental milestones but exhibit distinct characteristics shaped by their bilingual environment. They progress through pre-linguistic, single-word/holophrastic, two-word/telegraphic, and complex sentence stages, demonstrating typical phonological simplifications in early words. A key finding is the pervasive and systematic code-mixing observed from the two-word stage onwards, where children fluidly integrate and interchange words and phrases across their developing English and indigenous languages (such as Tiv, Igbo, Idoma, Etulo, Igede, and Hausa). This code-mixing is not a sign of confusion or delay, but rather a pragmatic and efficient communicative strategy that reflects their cognitive flexibility and adaptive use of all available linguistic resources to express increasingly complex thoughts within their mixed-language homes. The study reaffirms that parental input and the immediate linguistic environment are crucial in shaping the unique trajectory of bilingual acquisition in these settings.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Parents from mixed linguistic backgrounds should be encouraged to use both languages consistently and naturally at home. Rather than fearing that dual language exposure might confuse the child, they should understand that early bilingualism fosters cognitive flexibility and expressive richness. This nurturing approach should be grounded in research-informed parenting programmes.
2. Educators and caregivers in pre-primary and lower primary schools should be trained to recognise and support bilingual language patterns, especially code-mixing. Teachers should avoid penalising or correcting code-mixing as errors but instead scaffold language development through context-based language expansion and gentle modelling of standard usage.
3. Given early education curricula should integrate local languages meaningfully. This can be through songs, storytelling, role-play, and cultural immersion activities, which validate the children's home language experiences.

4. Future studies should investigate the cognitive and academic performance of bilingual children from mixed parentage in comparison with monolingual peers. Such research can further inform evidence-based policy and intervention strategies for multilingual education in Nigeria.

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