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A Pragmatic Analysis of Code-Mixing in Yorùbá-Arabic Bilingual Sermons in Ilorin

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Abstract

Language functions not merely as a tool of communication but also as a marker of identity, culture, and communal value. In multilingual societies, religious discourse is often a site where speakers blend codes to project both spiritual authority and social accessibility. In Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State in North-Central Nigeria, a city shaped by Islamic tradition and Yoruba heritage, clerics who deliver Jummah sermons routinely mix Arabic, the sacred language of Islam, with Yoruba, the language of everyday life. Although Yoruba-English code-mixing has attracted considerable scholarly attention in Nigeria, Yoruba-Arabic mixing in religious sermons remains largely unexamined, despite Ilorin's standing as a centre of Islamic scholarship. This study addresses that gap by investigating the patterns and pragmatic functions of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing in Jummah sermons in Ilorin. Adopting a qualitative design, the study draws on 15 audio-recorded sermons purposively sampled from mosques across the city, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 5 clerics and 5 congregants. Data were transcribed, coded, and analysed within a combined sociolinguistic and pragmatic framework. Findings reveal four recurrent patterns of code-mixing (inter-sentential switching, intra-sentential insertion, formulaic Arabic expressions, and switching for emphasis) that perform four corresponding pragmatic functions: asserting religious authority, clarifying meaning, engaging congregants emotionally, and structuring the sermon. Both clerics and congregants evaluate the practice positively, regarding it as a bridge between sacred authority and cultural intimacy. The study concludes that Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing in Ilorin sermons is a deliberate, function-driven strategy rather than an incidental habit,

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and recommends further research into comparable bilingual religious practices in other Nigerian speech communities.

Kata Kunci:

Pencampuran Kode; Alih Kode; Yorùbá; Arab; Sosiolinguistik; Pragmatik.

Abstrak

Bahasa tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai alat komunikasi, tetapi juga sebagai penanda identitas, budaya, dan nilai kemasyarakatan. Dalam masyarakat multibahasa, wacana keagamaan sering kali menjadi ruang di mana penutur memadukan kode bahasa untuk menampilkan otoritas spiritual sekaligus keterjangkauan sosial. Di Ilorin, ibu kota Negara Bagian Kwara di Nigeria Tengah-Utara — sebuah kota yang dibentuk oleh tradisi Islam dan warisan budaya Yorùbá — para ulama yang menyampaikan khotbah Jumat secara rutin memadukan bahasa Arab, bahasa suci Islam, dengan bahasa Yorùbá, bahasa kehidupan sehari-hari. Meskipun pencampuran kode Yorùbá-Inggris telah mendapat perhatian akademis yang cukup besar di Nigeria, pencampuran Yorùbá-Arab dalam khotbah keagamaan masih sangat jarang diteliti, terlepas dari kedudukan Ilorin sebagai pusat keilmuan Islam. Penelitian ini mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan mengkaji pola-pola dan fungsi pragmatis pencampuran kode Yorùbá-Arab dalam khotbah Jumat di Ilorin. Dengan mengadopsi desain kualitatif, penelitian ini memanfaatkan 15 khotbah yang direkam secara audio dan dipilih secara purposif dari berbagai masjid di kota tersebut, dilengkapi dengan wawancara semi-terstruktur bersama 5 ulama dan 5 jamaah. Data ditranskripsikan, dikodekan, dan dianalisis dalam kerangka gabungan sosiolinguistik dan pragmatik. Temuan mengungkap empat pola pencampuran kode yang berulang — alih kode antarkalimat, penyisipan intrakalimat, ekspresi formulaik bahasa Arab, dan alih kode untuk penekanan — yang masing-masing menjalankan empat fungsi pragmatis: menegaskan otoritas keagamaan, mengklarifikasi makna, melibatkan jamaah secara emosional, dan menstrukturkan khotbah. Baik ulama maupun jamaah menilai praktik ini secara positif, memandangnya sebagai jembatan antara otoritas sakral dan keakraban budaya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pencampuran kode Yorùbá-Arab dalam khotbah di Ilorin merupakan strategi yang disengaja dan berbasis fungsi, bukan kebiasaan yang terjadi secara kebetulan, serta merekomendasikan penelitian lanjutan mengenai praktik keagamaan bilingual yang sebanding di komunitas tutur Nigeria lainnya.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is not simply a vehicle for communication; it is also a living record of a people's identity, culture, and values. In multilingual societies, speakers rarely restrict themselves to a single linguistic code during an interaction. Instead, they draw on two or more languages available to

them, a practice that sociolinguists describe as code-switching and code-mixing. Auer (2010) and Fahnestock (2011) argue that this alternation is rarely accidental: it allows speakers to adapt their message to context, project authority, or draw closer to an audience. Nigeria, a country of considerable linguistic and cultural diversity, offers a natural setting for such practices, which are documented across education, politics, popular music, and religion (Okechukwu, 2025; Maffi & Woodley, 2012).

Within this broader Nigerian picture, Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State in North-Central Nigeria, presents a particularly rich case. As a city with a long history of Islamic scholarship and a predominantly Yoruba-speaking population, Ilorin is a setting in which multilingualism takes on a specifically religious dimension. Islamic clerics who lead Jummah (Friday) prayers routinely combine Arabic, the sacred language of the Qur'an, with Yoruba, the everyday language of their congregations. Arabic carries the authority of revelation; Yoruba supplies clarity, emotional warmth, and cultural relevance. Together, the two languages allow clerics to fashion a preaching style that is at once doctrinally authoritative and experientially close to their listeners' lives.

The pragmatic significance of this bilingual practice goes beyond simple alternation between codes. A cleric may recite a Qur'anic verse in Arabic to establish divine authority, then render it in Yoruba so the congregation can grasp its meaning. At other moments, single Arabic terms such as *sabr* ("patience") or *iman* ("faith") are inserted into an otherwise Yoruba utterance to sharpen a spiritual concept. Such choices are strategic rather than incidental: they help the cleric teach, persuade, and build solidarity with an audience that is itself linguistically layered, moving between religious literacy in Arabic and everyday fluency in Yoruba.

Scholarship on bilingual speech has long distinguished between code-switching and code-mixing, yet has also blurred the line between them. Grosjean (2010) describes code-switching as a full shift between languages within a single interaction, typically triggered by a change in context, audience, or topic. Amuzu (2014), by contrast, defines code-mixing as the insertion of words or phrases from one language into the grammatical frame of another, without a full shift of code. Alexiadou and Lohndal (2018) emphasise the syntactic patterning of such mixing. In contrast, Meeuwis and Blommaert (2013) foreground its social motivation, and Auer (2010) treats switching and mixing as two facets of the same multilingual phenomenon rather than as sharply separate categories. In the Nigerian context, both practices are pervasive in schools, the media, music, and religious life (Kiamu & Musa, 2021; Babalola & Taiwo, 2009), which suggests that the analytic distinction between them matters less than the communicative work they jointly perform.

Sociolinguistic theory situates language choice within social structure. Liddicoat (2012) shows that language is tied to distinct "domains" of life, including religion, and Busayo et al. (2025) argue that language use is inseparable from the expression of identity and belonging. Nigerian scholarship extends this insight: Ugwuanyi (2026) treats language as a mirror of cultural values, while Agoke (2019) argues that multilingualism is constitutive of Nigerian identity itself. In Ilorin specifically, Arabic in sermons signals sacred authority. At the same time, Yoruba anchors the same sermon in the city's cultural life, so that a single sermon can simultaneously perform religious and cultural identity work.

Where sociolinguistics explains why speakers switch, pragmatics explains what switching does in context. Dey (2023) defines pragmatics as the study of how meaning is shaped by speaker intention and situational context, which is precisely why code-mixing functions as a deliberate strategy rather than a random alternation. Auer et al. (2015) Markedness Model proposes that speakers switch codes to signal shifts in relationship or meaning, while Asgarova (2025) similarly argues that switching indexes social position rather than mere linguistic preference. Nigerian studies corroborate this pragmatic reading: Ekpo and Nyong (2022) found that Pentecostal preachers use code-switching and related discourse strategies to emphasise points and build rapport with

congregations, and Rohman (2016) observed that inserting Arabic into Yoruba sermons marks divine authority and lends authenticity to the preacher's message.

Grosjean (2019) and Gafaranga (2019) frame bilingualism as the complementary use of two languages, shaped by social context rather than by chance. Religious discourse intensifies this complementarity. Ekpo and Nyong's (2022) study of Pentecostal preaching found that clerics mix codes to convey their message while retaining prestige; in the Islamic sermons of Ilorin, Arabic serves as a sacred legitimation, while Yoruba secures a cultural connection with the congregation. Beyond Nigeria, Suleiman (2013) documents the symbolic power of Arabic across the wider Islamic world, and Giolfo and Sinatora (2011) describe how bilingual speakers in Saudi Arabia switch codes to balance religious faith with the demands of modern life. Most recently, Durrani et al. (2025) examined the socio-pragmatic functions of code-switching among ESL learners in Pakistan, confirming that switching performs identity and solidarity functions well beyond the Nigerian context.

Within Ilorin itself, Yoruba and Arabic are not used interchangeably but complementarily: Arabic secures sacred legitimacy, Yoruba conveys cultural identity, and their combination allows the Muslim community to hold faith and heritage in balance. Deckert and Vickers (2011) frame such bilingual practice as a form of identity negotiation, in which speakers draw on the languages available to them to manage multiple social affiliations simultaneously. Rohman (2016) argues that Arabic insertions such as *taqwā* ("piety") reinforce sacred authority while adding interpretive depth to a sermon. However, as several of these same scholars note in passing, Yoruba-Arabic switching in religious contexts has received far less systematic attention than the extensively researched Yoruba-English pattern.

Taken together, this body of work establishes three points with reasonable consensus. First, code-switching and code-mixing in Nigeria (and in Ilorin specifically) are deliberate, socially motivated practices rather than random alternations (Meeuwis & Blommaert, 2013; Auer, 2010; Alexiadou & Lohndal, 2018). Second, in religious settings, language choice performs identifiable pragmatic work — asserting authority, aiding comprehension, and building rapport (Ekpo & Nyong, 2022; Dey, 2023). Third, similar dynamics of bilingual religious speech have been documented for Arabic-medium worship elsewhere in the Muslim world (Suleiman, 2013; Giolfo & Sinatora, 2011) and for code-switching in other multilingual educational and religious settings (Durrani et al., 2025).

What this literature has *not* done, however, is examine these dynamics where Yoruba meets Arabic, specifically in the sermon as a genre. The existing Nigerian literature on code-mixing is overwhelmingly concentrated on Yoruba-English contact in secular domains such as music, education, and the market (Babalola & Taiwo, 2009; Ugwuanyi, 2026; Muhammad, 2023), with religion considered only in Christian Pentecostal preaching. Studies of Arabic in religious life outside Nigeria (Suleiman, 2013; Giolfo & Sinatora, 2011) illuminate the symbolic weight of Arabic but say little about how it interacts pragmatically with an African indigenous language such as Yoruba in live sermon delivery. Despite Ilorin's standing as one of the most important centres of Islamic scholarship in West Africa, no study to date has systematically examined how its clerics pattern and deploy Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing, or what pragmatic functions this mixing performs for both preacher and congregation. This is the research gap the present study addresses: what has been done is the documentation of code-mixing as a socially and pragmatically motivated practice in other language pairs and religious traditions; what remains to be done is a focused, data-based account of how Yoruba and Arabic are mixed in Ilorin's Jummah sermons and why.

Guided by this gap, the present study examines the patterns and pragmatic functions of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing in Jummah sermons delivered by Islamic clerics in Ilorin. Specifically, the study aims to (i) identify and classify the recurrent structural patterns of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing in the sermons, (ii) determine the pragmatic functions these patterns serve for clerics and

congregants, and (iii) situate these findings within existing sociolinguistic and pragmatic theory. To meet this objective, the study combines naturalistic sermon recordings with semi-structured interviews with both preachers and congregants, allowing the analysis to move beyond identifying linguistic patterns to an account, grounded in participants' own reflections, of why those patterns are used. In doing so, the study fills the identified gap by providing the first systematic, pragmatically oriented account of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing in Ilorin's religious sermons. It contributes new African data to the broader literature on bilingualism and religious discourse.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how Yoruba and Arabic are combined in Islamic sermons in Ilorin. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study was concerned not only with identifying instances of code-mixing but also with understanding the purpose and meaning that clerics and congregants themselves attach to the practice. The design allowed the sermons to be captured as they naturally occurred and interpreted through direct observation together with participants' own reflections, producing a descriptive and analytical account of the linguistic practices at work in religious sermons in the city. The population comprised Islamic clerics who deliver Jummah sermons and congregants who regularly attend these sermons in Ilorin. To obtain a representative cross-section of the city, fifteen mosques were purposively selected using two criteria: clerics known for preaching in both Yoruba and Arabic, and mosques located in different parts of Ilorin. The mosques sampled included Abdulmusin Central Mosque, NASFAT Mosque, Samsondeen Mosque (beside Ilepo Shogo), Aminah Mosque (behind Ilepo Shogo), Adeta Mosque (in Adeta), and Shao Mosque (near Shao Garage), among others. One sermon was recorded from a different cleric at each mosque, yielding a corpus of fifteen sermons. Recording across multiple mosques, rather than from a single preacher, was intended to capture a wider range of preaching styles and linguistic strategies. In addition, ten regular congregants across these mosques were purposively selected, and five clerics and five congregants were interviewed in depth to provide insight into the intentions behind the sermons and their reception.

Data collection was carried out over several weeks to allow for variation across preachers, mosques, and sermon themes. Sermons were audio-recorded using a Redmi A5 smartphone, with care taken to avoid interfering with the natural flow of preaching, so that the captured language reflected spontaneous communicative choices rather than a staged performance. Alongside the sermon recordings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five clerics and five congregants. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their own experience of the sermons and language choices while the researcher maintained focus on themes relevant to the study. Clerics were asked why they switched codes, what they intended by doing so, and how they perceived their congregants' response; congregants were asked about their comprehension of Arabic segments, their feelings about the mixed-language style, and how it affected their engagement with the sermon.

Recordings were listened to repeatedly before being manually transcribed, with particular attention to Arabic insertions and Yoruba segments; translations were provided where necessary to aid interpretation. Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, instances of code-mixing were identified and categorised into structural patterns — inter-sentential switching, intra-sentential switching, formulaic expressions, and emphatic or rhetorical switching. Second, each identified pattern was examined for its pragmatic function, namely asserting authority, clarifying meaning, engaging emotionally, or signalling structural transitions in the sermon. Responses from the semi-structured interviews were grouped thematically and analysed alongside the sermon data to corroborate and enrich the pattern-based analysis. Ethical standards were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's aims before recording and gave their consent to

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be interviewed. The identities of clerics and congregants were anonymised throughout, and data collection was conducted with sensitivity to religious practice, ensuring that sermons and other acts of worship were not disrupted.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the study's findings, drawing on 15 recorded Jummah sermons and accompanying interviews with clerics and congregants from mosques across Ilorin. The results are organised into three parts: the structural patterns of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing identified in the sermons, the pragmatic functions these patterns perform, and the perspectives of clerics and congregants on the practice. Across all three parts, the data converge on a single overarching finding: code-mixing in these sermons is not incidental but a deliberate communicative strategy that clerics use to aid comprehension and build cultural and emotional connection with their congregations.

1. Patterns of Code-Mixing in the Sermons

Analysis of the fifteen sermons identified four recurrent patterns of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing: inter-sentential switching, intra-sentential switching, formulaic Arabic expressions, and switching for rhetorical emphasis. Table 1 summarises these patterns before each is discussed with illustrative data.

Table 1. Key Literature on Augmented Reality in Education (2022–2025).

Pattern	Typical trigger	Illustrative form
Inter-sentential switching	Qur'anic recitation followed by translation	Full Arabic sentence, then full Yoruba sentence
Intra-sentential switching	Key religious concept	Single Arabic word/phrase embedded in a Yoruba sentence
Formulaic expressions	Ritual opening, closing, or exclamation	Untranslated set phrases (e.g. *Alḥamdulillāh*)
Switching for emphasis	Moral warning or exhortation	Sudden Arabic insertion mid-sentence for rhetorical force

Inter-sentential code-mixing

The most prominent pattern across the corpus was a switch at sentence boundaries, in which a cleric opened with a Qur'anic verse or supplication in Arabic and then rendered the same idea in Yoruba. At Adeta Mosque, for example, a cleric opened his sermon with: *"Yā ayyuha lladhīna āmanū, attaqū Allāha ḥaqqa tuqātihī wa lā tamūtunna illā wa antum Muslimūn"* ("O you who believe, fear Allah as He should be feared, and do not die except as Muslims" — Qur'an 3:102), before switching to Yoruba to convey the same message: *"Ẹ̀yin ará, Ọlọ́run sọ pé ká bẹ̀rù Rẹ̀ gẹ́gẹ́ bí ó ti yẹ, ká sì mura sí ọjọ́ ìkẹyìn"* ("Brethren, Allah says we should fear Him properly and prepare for the Last Day"). Asked to explain this pattern, the cleric noted that reciting in Arabic signals to the congregation that the words are God's. At the same time, the Yoruba rendering ensures the meaning, and not merely the sound, is received. A second cleric at Shao Mosque described the same alternation as a deliberate bridge: Arabic lends weight and sacred sanction. At the same time, the Yoruba translation "helps me break the message down" so that it settles with the congregation. A cleric at NASFAT Mosque linked the switch directly to visible audience response, noting that congregants nod, and sometimes exclaim *"Allāhu Akbar,"* once the Yoruba explanation lands — a cue he reads as evidence that the message has been understood. Across these accounts, inter-sentential switching

consistently performs a dual function: the Arabic segment establishes doctrinal authority, and the Yoruba segment converts that authority into comprehension and emotional resonance.

Intra-sentential code-mixing

A second, equally frequent pattern involved the insertion of single Arabic words or short phrases into an otherwise Yoruba sentence, without a full switch of code. Terms such as *ṣabr* ("patience"), *ṣalāt* ("prayer"), *zakāt* ("almsgiving"), and *Yawm al-Qiyāmah* ("the Day of Judgement") recurred across the corpus. At Shao Mosque, a cleric preached: *"Ẹ̀yin ẹrú sí n ọlọ́hun, bí a ṣe ń ghé ayé yìí, a gbọ́dọ̀ ní ṣabr, torí ẹni tí kò ní ṣabr kò le gba ìdánwò Allah"* ("As we live this life, we must have patience, because anyone who lacks patience cannot endure Allah's trials"). Explaining his choice of *ṣabr* over the Yoruba equivalent *sùúrù*, the cleric observed that the Arabic term marks the quality as an Islamic command rather than merely cultural advice. At Abdulmusin Central Mosque, a cleric similarly argued that terms such as *ṣalāt* and *ṣawm* are so familiar to congregants, including children, that translating them into Yoruba would diminish their sacred weight. A cleric at Aminah Mosque made a related point about terms such as *zakāt* and *du'ā*, noting that such insertions simultaneously connect the teaching to religion and culture and are easily remembered and repeated by congregants. The same pattern surfaced in emotionally charged appeals, as when a cleric at Samsondeen Mosque warned of *Yawm al-Qiyāmah*, explaining that the Arabic phrase "shakes the heart" in a way its Yoruba equivalent, *Ọjọ́ Ìdájọ́*, does not. Collectively, these examples suggest that intra-sentential mixing is a lexical strategy for preserving the doctrinal precision of key Islamic concepts while keeping the surrounding discourse accessible in Yoruba.

Formulaic Arabic expressions

A third pattern involved ritualised Arabic formulae — *As-salāmu ʿalaykum*, *Alḥamdulillāh*, *Subḥānallāh*, and *Allāhu Akbar* — that recurred across all fifteen sermons and were never translated into Yoruba. These expressions functioned as markers of transition, opening or closing a sermon, introducing a new theme, or punctuating moments of heightened spirituality. A cleric at NASFAT Mosque, who regularly opened with *"Alḥamdulillāh, naḥmaduhu wa nastaʿinuhu wa nastaghfiruhu…"* ("All praise is due to Allah; we praise Him, seek His help, and ask for His forgiveness…"), explained that translating such formulae into Yoruba would strip them of their rhythm and power, since the congregation already understands their spiritual sense. A cleric at Adeta Mosque made a similar point about the greeting *As-salāmu ʿalaykum*, to which the congregation responds immediately and which functions less as information to be translated than as a shared act of faith. A cleric at Shao Mosque added a further dimension, describing these formulae as expressions that unite Muslims across geography — Ilorin, Lagos, or Saudi Arabia — into a single *ummah*. Formulaic expressions thus operate as fixed, untranslated tokens whose communicative power depends precisely on remaining in Arabic.

Switching for emphasis

The final pattern was the rhetorical use of code-mixing to intensify a moral point or heighten emotional engagement, typically through a sudden mid-sentence switch. At Abdulmusin Central Mosque, a cleric urged: *"Ọlọ́run ń wo gbogbo ohun tí a ń ṣe. Fī sabīlillāh, ẹ fi owó yín ṣe rere"* ("Allah sees all that we do. For the sake of Allah, spend your wealth in good ways"), explaining that the Arabic phrase *fī sabīlillāh* transforms an ordinary piece of advice into a directive that is unmistakably framed as coming from God. At Samsondeen Mosque, a cleric used the phrase *Yawm al-Qiyāmah* mid-warning for a similar effect, arguing that the Arabic carries an "awe" that its Yoruba equivalent lacks. Clerics at NASFAT and Aminah Mosques described the rhetorical value of switching in near-identical terms: a sudden shift into Arabic "catches" the audience's attention and gives a point sharpness, "like a hammer on wood." Taken together, these accounts indicate that switching for

emphasis is a conscious rhetorical device, used to sustain attention and elevate key moments of a sermon to a higher spiritual register.

2. Pragmatic Functions of Code-Mixing

Across the four structural patterns, the interview and sermon data converge on four recurrent pragmatic functions, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Pragmatic functions of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing in the sermons.

Function	Description	Associated pattern(s)
Asserting religious authority	Qur'anic and Hadith citation in Arabic confers divine legitimacy on the cleric's words.	Inter-sentential; formulaic expressions
Clarifying meaning	Yoruba translation ensures comprehension for congregants without Arabic literacy.	Inter-sentential; intra-sentential
Engaging emotionally	Yoruba proverbs, parables, and exhortations build affective rapport	Switching for emphasis; intra-sentential
Structuring the sermon	Arabic formulae mark openings, closings, and thematic transitions	Formulaic expressions

These functions are not mutually exclusive within a single stretch of speech; a single Arabic insertion may simultaneously assert authority and structure a transition, for instance. What the data consistently show, however, is that clerics deploy Arabic and Yoruba as complementary rather than competing resources, drawing on each to accomplish communicative work that the other cannot accomplish as effectively.

3. Clerics' Perspectives

Interviews with the five clerics confirmed that code-mixing is experienced as an intentional pedagogical and pastoral choice rather than an unreflective habit. All five maintained that Arabic is indispensable to sermon delivery because it signals that the words spoken are, in the case of Qur'anic citation, Allah's own; Yoruba translation was described as equally indispensable for comprehension and emotional connection. A cleric at Adeta Mosque summarised this division of labour directly: reciting in Arabic marks the words as God's, while explaining in Yoruba allows the congregation to internalise them. A cleric at NASFAT Mosque added a relational dimension, observing that preaching only in Arabic risks being perceived as distant or self-regarding, whereas incorporating Yoruba signals care for the congregation and a genuine wish that the message reach them. These reflections suggest that clerics understand their bilingual practice as serving not only doctrinal but also relational ends — building trust and closeness alongside religious instruction.

4. Congregants' Perspectives

The five congregants interviewed uniformly described the bilingual sermon style as educational, inclusive, and spiritually enriching. A congregant at Samsondeen Mosque described the alternation between Arabic and Yoruba as feeling like "learning something sacred" while still being able to understand it, and a congregant at Aminah Mosque reported learning about both religion and culture through the mixed-language delivery. Generational differences also emerged in the data: younger congregants with limited Arabic literacy relied heavily on the Yoruba explanations. In contrast, older, Arabic-literate congregants could follow both languages but still preferred Yoruba for its cultural closeness. An elderly worshipper at Adeta Mosque captured this preference precisely, noting that hearing the message in Yoruba, even when the Arabic is understood, makes "the religion feel closer to home." Across both generational groups, congregants regarded code-mixing as an aid to understanding, memory, and attention, and as a means of ensuring that sermons resonate with both the sacred and the familiar.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that clerics in Ilorin do not alternate between Yoruba and Arabic by chance; their choices are patterned, purposeful, and finely timed to the communicative demands of the moment. Arabic is deployed chiefly to project spiritual authority, most visibly in direct citation from the Qur'an and Hadith. In contrast, Yoruba is deployed to render that authoritative content accessible and emotionally resonant. This division of labour is consistent with Meeuwis and Blommaert's (2013) argument that language switching carries social meaning beyond its referential content, and it echoes more recent Nigerian scholarship showing that bilingual preaching helps worshippers both understand a sermon's content and feel included in its delivery (Ekpo & Nyong, 2022; Ojo, 2022). Several congregants in this study explicitly valued Arabic for its sacredness while relying on Yoruba for comprehension, and some described the combination as leaving them spiritually nourished and culturally affirmed at once — an experience that resonates with Suleiman's (2013) observation that language can simultaneously carry religious and identity-based meaning. The Markedness Model illustration of "marked" and "unmarked" code choices operating within a single genre: Arabic is the marked, authority-signalling choice (Stell & Yakpo, 2015) while Yoruba functions as the unmarked choice of everyday solidarity and clarity, and clerics move between the two precisely at the points where a shift in relational meaning is intended — from proclamation to explanation, from citation to application (Fasinu et al., 2024). The findings also resonate with Speech Act Theory (Goodwin, 2014; Tan & Malaysia, 2021): a Qur'anic citation in Arabic does not merely state a proposition but also invokes divine sanction, while its Yoruba rendering performs the complementary act of instructing and persuading. Seen this way, code-mixing in these sermons is less a stylistic ornament than a sequence of distinct, coordinated speech acts, each carried by the language best suited to accomplish it.

At the same time, the Ilorin data extend existing theory in a way specific to this religious and linguistic context. Much of the literature on bilingual religious speech, including Ekpo and Nyong's (2022) work on Pentecostal preaching and Giolfo and Sinatora's (2011) account of Arabic-medium worship in Saudi Arabia, treats code-switching primarily as a means of balancing doctrinal fidelity with audience accessibility. The Ilorin case adds a further, more particular dimension: Arabic here is not simply one language among several available to the speaker but the specific sacred code of a scripture the congregation cannot alter or paraphrase. At the same time, Yoruba is not simply a vernacular alternative but the language that anchors Islam in a distinctly Yoruba cultural and ancestral identity. The interplay between the two, therefore, performs a double form of legitimation — religious legitimation through Arabic and cultural legitimation through Yoruba — that is less visible in contexts where the "sacred" and "vernacular" languages are less sharply differentiated, or where, as in Yoruba-English code-mixing, neither code carries scriptural authority.

The four pragmatic functions identified — asserting authority, clarifying meaning, engaging emotionally, and structuring the sermon — should therefore be read not as independent categories but as facets of a single communicative strategy through which clerics manage the tension between fidelity to sacred text and responsiveness to a living congregation. This reading also clarifies why both clerics and congregants describe the practice in positive, almost complementary terms: clerics experience code-mixing as a pastoral tool for teaching and persuading. In contrast, congregants experience it as a means of feeling simultaneously instructed and included. The convergence of these two perspectives is itself evidence that the practice is functioning as intended, rather than as an accidental by-product of clerics' bilingual competence.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the patterns and pragmatic functions of Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing in Jummah sermons in Ilorin, a practice that, despite the city's standing as a centre of Islamic scholarship, had not previously received sustained scholarly attention. Based on fifteen recorded

sermons and interviews with clerics and congregants, the study has shown that Yoruba-Arabic code-mixing follows four recurrent structural patterns and serves four corresponding pragmatic functions, and that clerics and congregants alike experience the practice as a deliberate and valuable feature of sermon delivery rather than an incidental habit. In sum, the study argues that code-mixing in these sermons is the linguistic mechanism through which Ilorin's Islamic clerics hold sacred authority and cultural belonging together: Arabic anchors the sermon in scriptural legitimacy, Yoruba anchors it in the lived culture of the congregation, and the movement between the two allows clerics to teach, persuade, and connect within a single act of preaching. By providing the first systematic, pragmatically grounded account of Yoruba-Arabic sermon mixing in Ilorin, the study extends existing sociolinguistic and pragmatic theory with African religious data. It confirms that, far from being a marker of linguistic deficiency, code-mixing in this setting is a sophisticated communicative resource through which faith and culture are jointly sustained.

Arising from the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed: 1) Islamic clerics should continue to strike a balance between Arabic and Yoruba in their sermons, ensuring that preaching remains both authoritative and accessible. 2) Religious educators should consider embedding training on bilingual communication within clerical education, to help preachers use code-mixing more effectively. 3) Congregants should be encouraged to recognise and value bilingual sermons as a resource that deepens both their religious knowledge and their cultural pride. 4) Future research should extend this line of inquiry to other multilingual religious contexts in Nigeria, such as Hausa-Arabic or Igbo-Arabic sermons, to broaden understanding of how language operates in faith communities.

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