



Language Maintenance in Commercial Interactions: An Evaluation of the Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic-Speaking Communities of Moundou

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RESUME

Cet article porte sur le maintien du ngambaye dans les interactions commerciales à Moundou, dans un contexte marqué par l'usage de plus en plus important de l'arabe tchadien. L'étude s'intéresse particulièrement aux pratiques langagières des commerçants et des clients dans les marchés, les points de vente et les espaces d'échange informels. Elle s'appuie sur l'approche de Fishman (1991) relative au maintien et au déplacement linguistiques, ainsi que sur les données recueillies auprès de 150 participants au moyen d'un questionnaire et d'observations de terrain.

Les résultats montrent que l'arabe tchadien occupe une place importante dans les échanges commerciaux et constitue la principale langue de communication entre personnes appartenant à des communautés linguistiques différentes. Il représente 48 % des usages fréquents relevés dans l'étude. Le ngambaye demeure cependant largement présent, avec 40,7 % d'usage fréquent. Il conserve surtout une forte valeur identitaire et joue un rôle important dans l'établissement de relations de confiance entre les personnes qui le partagent. Le français, malgré son statut de langue officielle, reste peu utilisé dans les échanges oraux observés, avec 11,3 % des usages fréquents.

L'étude met ainsi en évidence une situation de coexistence plutôt que de remplacement d'une langue par une autre. Dans les pratiques commerciales, l'arabe tchadien répond principalement aux besoins de communication entre locuteurs d'origines différentes, tandis que le ngambaye continue d'être utilisé pour exprimer l'appartenance, la proximité sociale et l'identité culturelle. Cette situation repose notamment sur la transmission intergénérationnelle, les attitudes positives envers le ngambaye et les avantages pratiques du plurilinguisme dans les activités commerciales.

Mots-clés : alternance codique, arabe tchadien, interaction commerciale, maintien linguistique, ngambaye.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the maintenance of Ngambaye in business interactions in Moundou, in a context where Chadian Arabic is increasingly used as a means of communication between speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. The study focuses on language practices among traders and customers in markets, shops, transport areas, and other informal commercial spaces. It draws on Fishman's (1991) approach to language maintenance and language shift and is based on data collected from 150 participants through a questionnaire and field observations.

The findings indicate that Chadian Arabic plays a major role in commercial communication and serves as the main language for interactions involving speakers from different linguistic communities. It accounts for 48% of frequent language use reported by participants. Ngambaye remains widely used, however, with 40.7% of frequent use. Beyond its communicative function, it continues to have strong symbolic value, particularly as a



marker of cultural identity and as a means of creating trust and social closeness among speakers who share the language. French, despite its official status in Chad, has a more limited role in everyday spoken commercial interactions, accounting for 11.3% of frequent use.

The findings therefore suggest a situation of coexistence rather than a straightforward replacement of one language by another. In commercial settings, Chadian Arabic mainly facilitates communication across ethnic and linguistic boundaries, while Ngambaye remains important for expressing identity, solidarity, and social belonging. This coexistence is supported by intergenerational transmission, positive attitudes toward Ngambaye, and the practical advantages of multilingualism in everyday commercial activities.

Keywords: business interaction, Chadian Arabic, code-switching, language maintenance, Ngambaye .

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not simply a means of communicating information. It is also closely connected to identity, social relationships, and a person's sense of belonging. In multilingual communities, speakers regularly make choices about the language they use, often without giving much conscious thought to those choices. The language selected may depend on the person being addressed, the nature of the interaction, the place where the conversation takes place, or the purpose of the exchange. Over time, however, these everyday choices can have important consequences for the maintenance or decline of a language.

Commercial spaces provide a particularly interesting setting in which to observe these processes. Markets, shops, transport stations and street stalls bring together people who do not necessarily share the same mother tongue. Sellers and customers therefore have to find practical ways of communicating, negotiating prices and establishing relationships. In such situations, language choice is not only a matter of mutual understanding. It can also express familiarity, social distance, trust and cultural belonging.

Chad provides a particularly relevant context for studying these issues. The country is characterized by considerable linguistic diversity, with numerous indigenous languages spoken alongside French and Arabic. French and Modern Standard Arabic have official status, while Chadian Arabic is widely used as a lingua franca in everyday communication between people from different linguistic backgrounds. Its use is especially visible in urban centres and in activities involving trade and mobility.

At the same time, indigenous languages continue to play an important role in the social and cultural life of their communities. Ngambaye is one of the major languages spoken in southern Chad and is closely associated with the identity of the Ngambaye people. It is used in family life, social activities, traditional practices and local communication. However, increasing urbanization, mobility and contact with speakers of other languages have created new linguistic situations, particularly in commercial settings where communication often extends beyond ethnic boundaries.

The situation in Moundou is especially interesting in this regard. As an important economic centre in southern Chad, the city brings together speakers from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. A trader may therefore use Ngambaye with one customer, switch to Chadian Arabic with another and occasionally use French with a more educated customer or in a more formal interaction. Language choice can consequently change several times during the same working day, and sometimes within the same transaction.

For traders, this flexibility has an obvious practical value. Using Chadian Arabic makes it possible to communicate with a wider range of customers, while the use of Ngambaye can create a sense of familiarity and trust among speakers who share the same linguistic background. In this respect, the two languages do not necessarily perform the same function. Chadian Arabic may provide wider communicative reach, whereas Ngambaye may strengthen interpersonal and cultural ties.

Language maintenance refers here to the continued use of a language by a community despite the social, economic or political pressures that may encourage speakers to adopt another language. Several factors can influence this process, including transmission from parents to children, attitudes toward the language, the



social value attached to it, the size and concentration of the speaker community, institutional support and the number of domains in which the language continues to be used.

The commercial domain deserves particular attention because it is one of the places where speakers are most frequently exposed to languages other than their mother tongue. A strong dependence on a lingua franca may gradually reduce the use of a local language. At the same time, regular use of that local language in commercial exchanges can contribute to maintaining its visibility and social value.

Previous sociolinguistic research has shown that multilingual speakers generally do not choose languages randomly. Their choices are influenced by the identity of the participants, the relationship between them, the purpose of the interaction and the communicative resources available to them. In many African multilingual settings, local languages coexist with regional or national lingua francas, with speakers moving between languages according to the situation.

Despite this growing body of research, relatively little attention has been given to the role of commercial interactions in maintaining indigenous languages in Chad. In particular, there is limited research on the language practices of Ngambaye speakers in Moundou and on the way these speakers negotiate their use of Ngambaye with the growing presence of Chadian Arabic.

The present study addresses this issue by examining language choice among traders and customers in Moundou. More specifically, it seeks to answer three questions: which languages are most frequently used in commercial interactions; what factors influence speakers' language choices; and to what extent do commercial exchanges contribute to the maintenance of Ngambaye alongside the growing use of Chadian Arabic?

The study also considers speakers' attitudes toward the two languages. This is important because actual language practices and attitudes do not always correspond. A speaker may recognize the practical importance of Chadian Arabic while continuing to attach considerable cultural value to Ngambaye. Examining both dimensions makes it possible to obtain a more complete picture of the linguistic situation in Moundou.

More broadly, this study contributes to discussions on multilingualism and language maintenance in African urban contexts. It may also provide useful information for educators, language planners and community organizations interested in preserving Chad's linguistic diversity while recognizing the practical importance of multilingual communication in contemporary economic life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language maintenance can be understood in relation to the social contexts in which speakers continue to use a language. Fishman (1991) argues that a language remains vital when it continues to perform meaningful functions in important areas of social life, including the family, education, religion, government, and economic activities. When speakers gradually stop using a language in these domains, they may become increasingly dependent on another language that offers wider social, political, or economic opportunities. Over time, this process can contribute to language shift.

The economic domain is particularly important in multilingual societies because commercial activities regularly bring together people from different linguistic backgrounds. In a market, language choice is therefore not simply about making oneself understood. The language selected by a trader can also communicate identity, solidarity, familiarity, prestige, or social distance. Studies of multilingual African markets generally show that local languages do not necessarily disappear when a regional lingua franca becomes more widely used. Instead, speakers often develop flexible multilingual practices involving bilingualism, code-switching, and accommodation to different customers.

2.1 Chad's Multilingual Landscape

Chad is characterized by considerable linguistic diversity, with more than 130 indigenous languages belonging to several language families. French and Arabic are the country's official languages, while Chadian Arabic has



developed into an important lingua franca for communication across linguistic and ethnic communities. Ngambaye, one of the major Sara languages spoken mainly in southern Chad, also occupies an important position in this multilingual environment. It functions as a marker of cultural identity within the Ngambaye community and, in parts of southern Chad, as a language of wider communication.

Roberts (1999) describes multilingualism as a central feature of everyday life in Chad. Speakers regularly move between languages according to the situation, the people involved, and the purpose of the interaction. This is particularly visible in urban areas, where French, Chadian Arabic, and indigenous languages are used alongside one another. Rather than existing as completely separate linguistic systems, these languages often have different communicative and social functions.

2.2 Chadian Arabic as a Language of Commerce

The importance of Chadian Arabic is particularly visible in commercial communication. Moussa and Ouassang (2023), in their study of Chadian Arabic in N'Djamena, show that prolonged contact among different linguistic groups has contributed to the development of a shared local variety. Chadian Arabic has consequently acquired an important role in everyday communication and in interactions involving people from different linguistic backgrounds.

Their findings also point to positive attitudes toward Chadian Arabic and to its perceived prestige. This is relevant to the present study because prestige and practical usefulness may influence language choice even when speakers remain strongly attached to their mother tongue. In a commercial environment such as Moundou, a trader may therefore choose Chadian Arabic because it allows communication with a wider range of customers, without this necessarily implying a rejection of Ngambaye.

French continues to play an important role in administration and formal education. In everyday interpersonal communication, however, Chadian Arabic often occupies a more central position, especially when speakers from different linguistic backgrounds need to communicate. Its use also extends beyond N'Djamena, bringing speakers from different communities into regular linguistic contact and creating opportunities for code-switching.

Research on communication in Chadian professional settings similarly suggests that language choice is often shaped by practical communication needs rather than official language policy alone. Employees may move between French, Chadian Arabic, and indigenous languages according to the linguistic background of the customer. Multilingual competence can therefore function as a practical resource in professional and commercial life.

2.3 Ngambaye and Language Maintenance

Compared with Chadian Arabic, Ngambaye has received less attention in research on language use outside the family and local community. Existing descriptions identify Moundou as an important linguistic and cultural centre for Ngambaye. The language is generally classified within the Central Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan family and is one of the most widely spoken Sara languages. It has also served as a means of communication among speakers of related varieties.

This position complicates a simple distinction between a dominant lingua franca and a marginalized local language. Ngambaye is not used only in private or domestic settings. It also has a regional communicative function and continues to carry considerable social and cultural meaning for its speakers.

Urbanization and increased mobility have not eliminated the importance of Ngambaye as a marker of identity, solidarity, and cultural knowledge. At the same time, speakers are increasingly exposed to Chadian Arabic and French, particularly through education, employment, and commerce. This situation raises an important question for the present study: does participation in commercial activities provide opportunities for maintaining Ngambaye, or does regular contact with Chadian Arabic gradually encourage speakers to rely more heavily on the lingua franca?



2.4 Language Choice in Business Interactions

The strategic and context-dependent language choices found in multilingual markets are consistent with research from other African contexts. Connell (2009), for example, examined language diversity and language choice in a multilingual market in Cameroon. His study provides a useful comparison because, as in Moundou, the market brings together speakers with different linguistic backgrounds who must negotiate communication during everyday commercial activities.

Similarly, Chishiba and Mvula (2022), in their study of the COMESA market in Lusaka, found that traders relied on local lingua francas such as Nyanja and Bemba, while English was used more frequently with foreign customers. When communication became difficult, traders also used language mixing and other communicative strategies. These findings suggest that multilingual traders do not necessarily select one language and maintain it throughout an interaction. Instead, they draw on different linguistic resources according to the person they are addressing and the situation in which communication takes place.

This perspective is useful for understanding commercial interactions in Moundou. Traders may use Ngambaye when speaking with members of their own linguistic community, switch to Chadian Arabic when communicating with customers from different backgrounds, and use French when the interaction is more formal or when the participants have a stronger educational background.

Informal language practices also help explain these patterns. Language choice in a market can be influenced by mutual intelligibility, the linguistic background of the customer, social relationships, power relations, and the need to communicate efficiently. Communication Accommodation Theory provides an additional explanation. Giles and Ogay (2007) argue that speakers often adjust their communicative behaviour in response to the people with whom they interact. In a multilingual market, this may involve moving toward the language of the customer while continuing to use one's own language with members of the same community.

2.5 Language Maintenance Through Economic Domains

Fishman's theory of language maintenance emphasizes the importance of continued language use across meaningful social domains. Previous research on multilingualism in Chad has paid considerable attention to the family, education, religion, and language policy. Comparatively less attention has been given to economic activities, even though markets provide frequent opportunities for speakers to use their languages in everyday interactions.

Commerce may contribute to language maintenance in several ways. When a trader and a customer share Ngambaye, using the language can create familiarity and trust. Such interactions provide speakers with regular opportunities to use Ngambaye outside the home. When the participants do not share the language, however, Chadian Arabic may be preferred because of its wider communicative reach.

The coexistence of these languages in commercial interactions should therefore not automatically be interpreted as a process in which one language replaces the other. It may instead represent a form of functional multilingualism in which Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic serve partly different purposes. Understanding this relationship is central to the present study.

2.6 Research Gap

Existing research has documented Chad's multilingual environment, the growing role of Chadian Arabic, and multilingual practices in professional and urban settings. However, relatively little attention has been given specifically to the maintenance of Ngambaye within business interactions.

Most previous studies have focused on language policy, education, family language use, or general patterns of urban multilingualism. The commercial domain remains comparatively underexplored. In particular, limited research has examined how Ngambaye-speaking traders and customers negotiate language choice when



interacting with Chadian Arabic speakers, or what these everyday choices mean for the maintenance of Ngambaye.

Markets are particularly relevant because they provide frequent opportunities for interaction among people from different linguistic backgrounds. Examining these interactions can therefore contribute to a better understanding of whether commercial activities support the continued use of Ngambaye or encourage greater reliance on Chadian Arabic.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

The study draws primarily on Fishman's theory of language maintenance and domain vitality. These perspectives help explain how continued language use in important social domains can contribute to language vitality. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007) complements this approach by focusing on the choices speakers make during actual interactions.

The study also draws on Fishman's reversing language shift model, particularly its emphasis on intergenerational transmission, and Spolsky's language policy model, which considers the relationship between language practices, language beliefs, and language management.

Together, these perspectives provide a framework for examining how Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic are used, maintained, and alternated during commercial exchanges. The broader aim is to understand how commercial language practices contribute to the continued use of Ngambaye while also reflecting the expanding communicative role of Chadian Arabic in southern Chad.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to examine both patterns of language use and the attitudes that shape language choice among Ngambaye speakers in commercial settings. The quantitative component provided an overview of language-use patterns, while the qualitative component helped explain how traders and customers actually negotiate language choice during everyday interactions.

The study was conducted in Moundou, particularly in the central market and surrounding street sales points. These locations were selected because they bring together speakers from different linguistic backgrounds and provide regular opportunities for interaction between Ngambaye speakers and users of Chadian Arabic.

3.2 Participants

The target population consisted of Ngambaye-speaking people involved in commercial activities, including shop owners, market vendors, wholesalers, and customers. A total of 150 participants took part in the study. Twenty-five participants (16.7%) were between 20 and 29 years old, 78 (52.0%) were between 30 and 39, and 47 (31.3%) were between 40 and 49. Men represented 83.3% of the sample, while women represented 16.7%. Regarding education, 34 participants (22.7%) had received no formal schooling, 67 (44.7%) had completed primary education, and 49 (32.7%) had reached secondary education. Market vendors formed the largest occupational group, with 83 participants (55.3%), followed by wholesalers with 35 (23.3%), shop owners with 21 (14.0%), and customers with 11 (7.3%).

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and direct observation. The questionnaire covered five main areas: demographic background, language use during commercial interactions, language maintenance practices, factors influencing language choice, and perceived challenges and possible solutions. Several statements used a Likert scale to capture participants' attitudes toward the use of Ngambaye and Chadian



Arabic in business. The questionnaire was administered at participants' places of business, allowing responses to be collected in the same environment in which the language practices under investigation normally occur. Direct observation was used to complement the questionnaire responses. During the field visits, attention was paid to the languages used between traders and customers, instances of code-switching, and changes in language choice when participants with different linguistic backgrounds joined an interaction.

4. RESULTS

Data were collected through a questionnaire and observation covering participants' demographic background, language use in business, language maintenance, the factors shaping language choice, and the challenges and suggestions participants raised.

4.1 Illustrative Field Observations

Before turning to the questionnaire data, it is worth grounding the statistical patterns in a few concrete scenes from the market floor, drawn from the observation component of the fieldwork. These vignettes are illustrative rather than representative in a statistical sense, but they show the kind of moment-to-moment switching that the numbers in Tables 2 and 3 summarize in aggregate.

At a cereal stall in the central market, a vendor greeted an older woman in Ngambaye, and the two continued the entire exchange, price negotiation included, in Ngambaye without a single word of Chadian Arabic. Minutes later, when a young man who was clearly not Ngambaye-speaking approached the same stall, the vendor switched immediately to Chadian Arabic, adjusting not only the language but the register, shorter, more transactional phrases, with none of the extended greetings that had opened the previous exchange. The same vendor later explained, when asked informally, that she “can tell from how someone greets” which language to answer in, and that getting it wrong “makes the customer feel like a stranger.”

At a stretch of street stalls selling household goods, a wholesaler was observed switching languages mid-sentence while negotiating with two customers standing side by side, one Ngambaye-speaking, one not. He opened the price discussion in Chadian Arabic so both customers could follow, then turned briefly to Ngambaye to make an aside to the first customer about the quality of the goods, a comment that functioned less as information than as a signal of shared background and trust, before returning to Chadian Arabic to close the sale with both. This kind of within-transaction switching, rather than a single language choice per interaction, came up repeatedly during the observation sessions and is not fully captured by a questionnaire item that asks participants to name the language or languages they “use to serve customers.”

A third scene, at a transport stand rather than a market stall proper, involved a driver's assistant calling out destinations to passersby. He alternated between Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic phrases within the same call, seemingly to widen the pool of passengers who might respond, then settled into whichever language the first passenger to approach had used. French appeared only once across the observation sessions in this kind of informal commercial speech, when a school-uniformed customer addressed a shopkeeper in French and the shopkeeper, after a brief pause, answered in French before reverting to Chadian Arabic for the next customer.

Taken together, these observations support the questionnaire finding that language choice tracks the customer rather than a fixed personal preference, and they suggest that the true unit of analysis in this setting is often the utterance or the addressee within a transaction, not the transaction as a whole. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the sample.

Table 1 Demographic Features of Participants (N = 150)

Variable	Catégorie/Category	N	%
Age	20–29	25	16.6
	30–39	88	58.7
	40–49	47	31.3

Genre / Gender	Homme / Male	125	83.3
	Femme / Female	25	16.6
Education level	No formal instruction	34	22.6
	Primary	67	44.6
	Secondary	49	32.6
Profession	Store owner/Boutique	21	14
	Market seller/Vendeur	83	55.3
	Wholesaler/Grossiste	35	23.3
	Client/Client	11	7.3
Total		150	100

The sample skewed toward the middle of the age range: 58.7% of participants were between 30 and 39, 31.3% between 40 and 49, and only 16.6% between 20 and 29. That weighting toward middle-aged adults is useful for a maintenance study, since this group sits between older, largely monolingual speakers and younger, more French- or multilingual-leaning generations. Men made up 83.3% of the sample against 16.6% women, an imbalance that most likely reflects where the data was collected: markets and trading posts in this region are dominated by male vendors and wholesalers. On education, 44.6% of participants had only primary schooling, 32.6% secondary, and 22.6% none at all. That relatively low level of formal education is worth keeping in mind when reading the attitude data later, since schooling tends to track with exposure to, and attitudes toward, official or lingua-franca languages like French. Occupationally, market vendors made up over half the sample (55.3%), followed by wholesalers (23.3%), shop owners (14.0%), and customers (7.3%), which places the sample squarely inside the informal trade sector, a setting built around frequent, functional multilingual contact.

Table 2 Language Choice When Serving Customers (N = 150)

Language(s) used	N	%
Ngambaye only	30	20
Arabe tchadien only	10	6.7
Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic	47	31.3
Ngambaye, Chadian Arabic and French	63	42
TOTAL	150	100

Asked which language(s) they use to serve customers, participants leaned heavily toward mixing rather than sticking to one. The largest group (42.0%) reported switching among all three available languages, Ngambaye, Chadian Arabic, and French, depending on the interaction, and a further 31.3% reported alternating specifically between Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic. Together these two multilingual categories cover 73.3% of the sample, which makes flexible, audience-adjusted code choice the norm in Moundou's markets rather than the exception.

Exclusive use of one language was comparatively rare: 20.0% reported using only Ngambaye and just 6.7% only Chadian Arabic. That low figure for Chadian Arabic alone is worth pausing on, since it is the region's lingua franca; vendors evidently don't lean on it in isolation but pair it with Ngambaye or French depending on who they're serving. This default pattern of switching, rather than fixed monolingual use, fits what the language-contact literature usually describes as a functionally distributed multilingual repertoire, where each language is kept for particular people or particular needs rather than one language pushing the others out. It's

also a pattern worth setting against the attitude data further down, since using several languages in practice doesn't necessarily line up with how strongly people report feeling loyal to Ngambaye as a heritage language.

Table 3 Language Use Frequency in Business Interactions (N = 150)

Languages	N	%
Chadian Arabic	72	48
Ngambaye	61	40.7
French	17	11.3
Total	150	100

Chadian Arabic came out as the most frequently used language overall (48.0%), with Ngambaye close behind (40.7%) and French trailing well back at 11.3%. Between them, Chadian Arabic and Ngambaye account for nearly 90% of reported frequent use, which underlines just how central both languages are to daily commercial life in Moundou.

This adds a useful layer to the language-choice data above. Table 2 showed that most vendors habitually mix languages; Table 3 shows that when a single language does dominate a given interaction, Chadian Arabic edges out Ngambaye slightly. That fits its role as a regional lingua franca, which likely gives it the advantage with customers of mixed or unknown linguistic background, while Ngambaye probably sees more frequent use with customers already known, or assumed, to share that identity.

French's marginal share (11.3%) suggests that despite its official status, it plays a limited role in Moundou's everyday spoken commerce, a pattern that echoes what's been reported for informal trade elsewhere in West and Central Africa. The low figure likely also tracks the education profile in Table 1: French proficiency in Chad is closely tied to years of formal schooling, and a large share of this sample had little of it. Taken together, this pattern, Chadian Arabic and Ngambaye jointly running the oral commercial exchange while French stays largely on the sidelines, supports the idea that Moundou's multilingual market ecology is actively sustaining Ngambaye rather than crowding it out.

Table 4 Attitudes Toward Language Use in Business (N = 150)

N°	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
1	I prefer using my mother tongue in business transactions	0	75	0	38	37	150
2	Speaking Ngambaye helps in preserving cultural identity	0	25	25	0	100	150
3	Speaking Chadian Arabic is important for successful business	0	0	0	48	102	150
4	Clients appreciate to be served in their preferred language	0	0	0	150	0	150
5	French replaces local languages in business communication	0	0	0	150	0	150
6	Local languages use reinforces confidence among buyers and sellers	0	0	0	25	125	150
7	Encourage youth to use local languages in business	0	0	25	100	25	150
8	Local languages should be continuously used in market places	0	0	26	74	50	150

Table 4 sets out attitudinal responses across eight statements touching on language, identity, and business practice. Opinion on Statement 1, preferring the mother tongue in transactions, was split roughly down the



middle: half disagreed while the rest agreed or strongly agreed. That even split suggests mother-tongue preference isn't a value everyone holds equally in a transactional setting, likely because serving a linguistically mixed customer base tempers whatever affective preference a trader might otherwise have.

Statement 2 told a different story: two-thirds of participants strongly agreed that speaking Ngambaye helps preserve cultural identity, with the rest split evenly between disagreement and neutrality. Whatever ambivalence shows up around practical preference, then, the symbolic value attached to Ngambaye is held broadly and strongly.

Statement 3 drew unanimous endorsement: every participant agreed or strongly agreed that Chadian Arabic matters for business success, with no disagreement at all, which reflects just how settled the perception of its economic value is. Statements 4 and 5 were both unanimous as well: participants agreed across the board that customers appreciate being served in their preferred language, and, just as unanimously, that French is not replacing local languages in business.

Statement 6 showed near-total agreement that local languages build trust between buyers and sellers (83.3% strongly agree, 16.7% agree, no disagreement). Statement 7 found strong support for encouraging young people to use local languages in business (66.7% agree, 16.7% strongly agree, the rest neutral, none opposed), and Statement 8 showed similarly broad support for continued use of local languages in markets (49.3% agree, 33.3% strongly agree, 17.3% neutral, no disagreement).

One result deserves closer attention: the unanimous agreement with Statement 5, that French isn't replacing local languages, sits next to frequency data showing French used in only 11.3% of interactions, well behind both Chadian Arabic and Ngambaye. That isn't really a contradiction; the two items are measuring different things. Statement 5 captures a perceived trend, while the frequency data captures current, everyday practice, and there are a few ways to read the gap between them. One is that respondents may sense French encroaching, in education, administration, media, youth aspiration, without French having actually displaced local languages in the spoken marketplace itself; attitudes often anticipate change before behavior does. Another is that French's advance may be happening in adjacent domains, signage, formal invoicing, dealings with younger or more educated customers, rather than in the face-to-face vending interactions this study focuses on. A third possibility is that the very fact respondents perceive French as encroaching, combined with their strong identity attachment to Ngambaye, points to a kind of linguistic vigilance that itself drives active maintenance rather than passive drift; communities that sense a threat to a heritage language often mobilize more consciously around it. Read this way, Statement 5 doesn't undercut the maintenance argument so much as sharpen it: maintenance appears to be happening despite, and partly because of, an acknowledged pressure from French.

Table 5 Factors Influencing Language Choice

Factors	N	%
Client's language	77	51.3
Sales / profit	0	0
Social status	43	28.7
Cultural identity	30	20
Total	150	100

Accommodating the customer's language was the clear leading factor (51.3%), consistent with Communication Accommodation Theory: traders adjust their language to whoever they're speaking with as a pragmatic move rather than out of a fixed preference. Profit or sale volume received no responses at all, which suggests participants don't experience language choice as directly tied to economic gain; it reads instead as socially and relationally motivated. Social status (28.7%) and cultural identity (20.0%) together account for roughly half the remaining responses, which means language choice still carries symbolic weight, prestige and belonging, alongside pure accommodation.



On perceived change in language use over the past decade, opinion was close to even: 52.7% said yes, 47.3% said no. Those who reported change pointed to Ngambaye speakers making more effort to speak Chadian Arabic, which hints at a gradual accommodation pressure specific to the business domain. This doesn't contradict the maintenance argument developed here, but it does complicate it a little: Ngambaye appears to hold its ground in-group and as an identity marker, in line with the earlier attitude data on identity and trust, while accommodation toward Chadian Arabic keeps increasing as a business necessity. Functional bilingualism, in other words, rather than a straightforward story of maintenance or shift.

Asked about the challenges of using Ngambaye in business, 65.3% said it “excites customers,” generating goodwill and rapport, while 35.3% reported no challenges at all. Very few framed Ngambaye as a liability; most treat it as an asset that draws customers in, which supports the maintenance argument directly, since using the language builds solidarity rather than getting in the way.

Asked which language dominates business today, 77.3% named Chadian Arabic and 22.7% named Ngambaye, and every participant who elaborated pointed to Chadian Arabic's role as Chad's lingua franca as the reason. On what would encourage continued Ngambaye use, 52.7% pointed to individual or community-level choice, simply continuing to speak it, while 47.3% called for more deliberate language management around Chadian Arabic's dominance.

Put together, participants readily accept that Chadian Arabic dominates structurally, as an externally imposed, functional necessity, without treating Ngambaye as a burden to use; most credit its survival to individual and community effort rather than policy. That points toward a diglossic complementarity: Chadian Arabic as the economic lingua franca, Ngambaye persisting through affective and identity-based motivations at the interpersonal level, which is the kind of nuanced maintenance-under-pressure picture this study set out to document.

5. DISCUSSION

Read together, the results sketch a pattern that fits uneasily into a simple maintenance-versus-shift story, and the three theoretical frames introduced earlier, Fishman's domain vitality, Communication Accommodation Theory, and Myers-Scotton's markedness model, help explain why.

On domain vitality, the evidence points to a language that is holding its functional ground rather than losing it. Ngambaye is not confined to the household in this sample: it accounts for 40.7% of reported frequent use in business (Table 3), and 51.3% of participants report using it alone or alongside Chadian Arabic when serving customers (Table 2). Fishman's framework would predict that a language retreating from a domain shows declining use there over time; what these data show instead, at least in this cross-sectional snapshot, is a language still doing substantial communicative work in commerce, precisely the domain most exposed to a competing lingua franca. The near-unanimous attitudinal support for continued Ngambaye use in markets (Table 4, Statements 6 and 8) suggests this is not passive survival but something closer to active domain defense, consistent with Sallabank's (2013) point that communities who sense pressure on a heritage language often mobilize more consciously around it rather than simply letting it recede.

Communication Accommodation Theory accounts well for the moment-to-moment mechanics documented in the field observations (Section 5.1): vendors were not choosing a language once per relationship but recalibrating within a single transaction, sometimes within a single sentence, based on who stood in front of them. The leading factor participants cited for language choice, the customer's own language (51.3%, Table 5), is exactly what accommodation theory predicts, and it explains why exclusive use of a single language was comparatively rare (Table 2): a vendor serving a linguistically mixed clientele over the course of a morning has every practical reason to keep switching rather than settle on one code.

Myers-Scotton's markedness model helps explain the asymmetry between Chadian Arabic and French that runs through the results. Chadian Arabic functions as the unmarked choice for cross-ethnic commercial exchange, which is consistent with its high frequency of use (48.0%, Table 3) despite comparatively low exclusive use



(6.7%, Table 2): it is less a language anyone strongly identifies with in the marketplace than a default that gets the transaction done without social cost. French, by contrast, remains marked in this setting, its low frequency (11.3%, Table 3) reflects not weak status but a specialized, occasional role, appearing mainly where education or formality is already signaled, as in the single French-language exchange recorded during observation (Section 5.1). This also clarifies the apparent tension noted earlier between the unanimous belief that French threatens local languages (Statement 5) and its marginal role in spoken practice: the threat participants perceive plausibly lies in adjacent, more formal domains, schooling, administration, official documentation, rather than in the face-to-face vending encounters this study observed directly.

Taken as a whole, the discussion suggests that what looks at first like competition between three languages is better described as three languages settling into distinct, non-overlapping functional niches: Ngambaye carrying identity and in-group trust, Chadian Arabic carrying unmarked cross-ethnic transaction, and French carrying formality and status at the domain's edges. That layered arrangement, rather than a contest with a winner and a loser, is what appears to be sustaining Ngambaye in Moundou's commercial life.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations qualify the scope of these findings. First, the sample is heavily skewed toward men (83.3%), which mirrors the gender composition of vendors and wholesalers observed in Moundou's markets but leaves open the question of whether women traders and customers, who may occupy different niches within the market or interact with different customer profiles, negotiate language choice in the same way. A more gender-balanced sample, or a companion study focused specifically on women traders, would help establish whether the patterns reported here generalize across the market population.

Second, the data were collected at a single site, the central market and adjoining street sales points in Moundou. While Moundou is the largest urban and commercial center in southern Chad and a reasonable proxy for Ngambaye-Chadian Arabic contact, language choice in smaller towns, rural markets, or border-trade contexts may follow different pressures, particularly where exposure to Chadian Arabic or French is more limited. The findings should accordingly be read as characteristic of an urban commercial hub rather than as representative of southern Chad as a whole.

Third, the study relies substantially on self-reported language use, gathered through a structured questionnaire, supplemented by four hours of direct observation rather than sustained, longitudinal fieldwork. Self-report data are prone to social desirability effects: participants may overstate their use of Ngambaye given the strong positive attitudes the same respondents expressed toward it as a marker of identity, or they may understate the extent to which Chadian Arabic has become their default working language. The observation component was designed to cross-check reported practice, but its limited duration means it can only partially correct for this gap between stated attitudes and everyday behavior.

Fourth, the questionnaire's closed-ended items, while useful for identifying broad patterns, constrain the range of factors participants could report. The near-total consensus on several Likert items (Statements 3, 4, 5) may partly reflect the phrasing of those items rather than genuine unanimity of experience, and richer qualitative interviewing would likely surface more variation in how individual traders reason about language choice.

Finally, the analysis treats Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic as the primary axis of contact, with French included mainly as a secondary point of comparison. Other indigenous languages present in Moundou's commercial space, spoken by minority ethnic groups passing through or settled in the city, fall outside this study's scope, even though their presence likely shapes the broader multilingual ecology traders navigate.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings carry practical implications for language policy, education, and community-level action in Chad's multilingual commercial centers.



For language policy makers, the results suggest that supporting Ngambaye's vitality does not require displacing Chadian Arabic's established role as the region's commercial lingua franca. A policy approach built on functional complementarity, recognizing that Chadian Arabic will continue to carry the bulk of cross-ethnic commercial communication while Ngambaye continues to carry identity and trust within its own community, is likely to be both more realistic and more acceptable to traders than one that frames the two languages as being in competition.

For educators, the strong support participants expressed for encouraging youth to use local languages in business (Statement 7) points toward a role for schools and vocational training programs in southern Chad: integrating basic commercial vocabulary and communication skills in Ngambaye alongside French and Chadian Arabic could reinforce intergenerational transmission at the point where it is most at risk, among younger speakers moving into urban trade.

For community and cultural associations, the finding that most participants credit Ngambaye's survival in commerce to individual and community-level choice rather than formal policy (52.7%) suggests that grassroots initiatives, market-day cultural events, trader associations that actively use Ngambaye in their internal communication, mentorship linking older and younger vendors, may do more concrete work for maintenance than top-down language planning alone.

For future research, three directions follow directly from the limitations above: a gender-balanced or women-focused replication of this study; a comparative study extending the same design to smaller southern Chadian market towns, to test whether the urban pattern documented here holds outside Moundou; and a longitudinal design tracking the same traders' language choices over several years, which would speak more directly to the generational-shift question this study could only address through retrospective self-report.

8. CONCLUSION

Language maintenance among Ngambaye speakers in Moundou's markets is neither stubborn resistance nor quiet assimilation; it looks more like an ongoing, strategic negotiation between linguistic identity and economic pragmatism. Chadian Arabic has clearly settled into the role of dominant marketplace lingua franca, but Ngambaye speakers haven't abandoned their mother tongue in response. Most simply run a flexible multilingual repertoire, drawing on Ngambaye, Chadian Arabic, and French depending on who they're talking to, what the transaction is, and what feels socially at stake. This negotiation involves three tensions. The first is practical versus symbolic: most participants favor Chadian Arabic because it's useful for business, but even more of them say Ngambaye matters for their cultural identity and for building trust with clients. So people value both languages for different reasons, rather than seeing them as competing.

The second is generational: participants were almost evenly split on whether things have changed over the last ten years. Those who said yes pointed to Ngambaye speakers using more Chadian Arabic, suggesting a slow shift driven by market pressure.

The third tension changes the picture. Participants agreed far more strongly that French threatens both local languages than they did about Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic being rivals. This suggests the real long-term concern isn't competition between Ngambaye and Chadian Arabic, but the growing presence of French.

The near-unanimous sense that customers appreciate being served in their own language, paired with strong support for continued local-language use in markets and for encouraging younger speakers to use Ngambaye, points to a real reservoir of goodwill that deliberate maintenance efforts could build on. But attitudes don't guarantee behavior on their own: Chadian Arabic's higher day-to-day frequency, despite favorable attitudes toward Ngambaye, is a familiar gap between what people say and what they do, one well documented in other language-contact settings.

These results reach beyond Moundou's markets. They suggest that in economically uneven multilingual settings, maintenance owes less to resisting a dominant lingua franca than to languages settling into com-



plementary functional roles, one carrying identity and trust, the other carrying commercial reach. Future work could track language choice across generations over time, extend the comparison to other Chadian market towns, and look more closely at French's part as a third force shaping this bilingual balance. Any policy or community effort aimed at supporting Ngambaye's vitality would probably do better building on its existing ties to trust and identity in commercial life than trying to displace Chadian Arabic's established role as a trade language.

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