



LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN THE IGALA MARKETPLACE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FOOD VENDOR TERMINOLOGY

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Abstract

*This study explores the terminology used for food vendors in the Igala language, examining how linguistic expressions encode social identity, gender roles, and age hierarchies within the community. Grounded in the Ethnography of Communication and Social Identity Theory, the research interprets vendor naming as both a communicative practice and a marker of group belonging. Data were generated through focus group discussions and participant observation among Igala food vendors and community members in Idah, Ankpa, and Anyigba. Findings reveal that vendor terms such as *Qma oje* “child of food” and *Iye oje* “mother of food” serve not merely as occupational labels but as social descriptors that reflect Igala values of respect, apprenticeship, and nurturing. These terms linguistically differentiate between young and adult vendors, male and female traders, thereby reinforcing cultural hierarchies. However, emerging neutral expressions such as *Ene ki a t’oje* - “one who sells food” demonstrate a linguistic shift toward inclusivity and equality. This evolution, captured in the proposed ATVEGA (Alternative Terminology for Vendors Excluding Gender and Age) model, reflects the community’s adaptation to modern social values while retaining cultural coherence. By applying the Ethnography of Communication, the study illuminates how vendor naming operates as a culturally situated speech event governed by social norms. Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, it further explains how these linguistic choices sustain or challenge traditional identity categories. The research concludes that language in the Igala marketplace functions as both a mirror and a medium of cultural transformation, highlighting the dynamic interplay between tradition, communication, and identity.*

Keywords: Language, Ethnography of Communication, Social Identity, Food Vendors, ATVEGA

1. Introduction

Food vending is a vital component of economic and social life across the world. In many societies, local food vendors contribute not only to the sustenance of urban and rural populations but also to the preservation of culinary traditions and community bonds (Gerhardt et al., 2013). In Africa, this informal economic sector holds particular significance, providing affordable meals, employment opportunities, and a space for social interaction. It is estimated that millions of people across the continent depend on food vending for their livelihood, with women constituting the majority of vendors due to the gendered structure of informal labour markets (Clark, 1994; Akyeampong, 2000). According to Adeosun et al. (2022), African food vendors are often categorized into three main groups: traditional food vendors (TFVs), processed food vendors (PFVs), and unprocessed food vendors (UPFVs). These forms of vending reflect deep historical roots shaped by trade, migration, colonialism, and modern urbanization.

Ethnographic studies across Africa emphasize that food vending extends far beyond its economic role. It embodies cultural practices, social relations, and identity formation. Vendors often engage in reciprocal relationships with their customers, fostering trust and community solidarity through practices such as credit sales and personalized service (Lindsay, 2003). Furthermore, food preparation and sales

frequently involve indigenous knowledge systems, recipes, techniques, and rituals passed down through generations that preserve and transmit cultural heritage (Eze & Abubakar, 2019). Within this context, food vending becomes an arena where gender dynamics, cultural identity, and social hierarchies are continually negotiated and reinforced.

Within Nigeria, the socio-cultural and linguistic dimensions of food vending reveal how deeply language intersects with everyday life. Among the Igala people of Kogi State, the terminology used to describe or name food vendors provides a rich lens through which social organization can be understood. The Igala language encodes distinctions between vendors based on gender, age, and social roles, reflecting the broader societal values and expectations surrounding labour, respect, and family. These naming practices reveal how language not only categorizes individuals but also communicates social meanings tied to care, maturity, and contribution within the community. For instance, terms that distinguish between young and adult, male and female vendors highlight the interplay of age and gender in defining one's social and economic identity.

This paper, therefore, explores the terminologies associated with food vendors in the Igala language as a window into the community's cultural and linguistic worldview. It examines how these linguistic forms mirror societal structures, gender relations, and evolving attitudes toward inclusivity. By analyzing the meanings and implications of vendor-related terms, the study seeks to demonstrate how language serves as both a reflection and a reinforcement of Igala cultural identity and social organization.

Language is a key medium through which social relations, cultural values, and identity categories are expressed and reproduced. In the Igala-speaking community of central Nigeria, the terminology used to name food vendors encapsulates complex notions of age, gender, hierarchy, and belonging. Terms such as *Qma oje* ("child of food") and *Iye oje* ("mother of food") are not merely occupational labels; they reflect deeply embedded cultural expectations about maturity, respect, and social responsibility. However, these traditional naming patterns also reveal asymmetries of power and gendered hierarchies that may no longer align with contemporary social realities. Recent linguistic shifts, especially among younger vendors, suggest an emerging preference for neutral and inclusive terms such as *Ene ki a t'oje* ("one who sells food"), signaling a gradual movement away from gender- and age-specific naming conventions. Yet, despite their social significance, these linguistic patterns remain understudied in academic discourse. There is limited ethnographic research exploring how such terms function as communicative practices that both mirror and reshape Igala identity in everyday contexts. This gap motivates the present study, which seeks to examine food vendor terminology not only as a linguistic phenomenon but as a social act, a form of cultural communication that reveals how the Igala community negotiates identity, power, and inclusivity in the marketplace setting.

The main objective of this study is to examine the socio-linguistic significance of food vendor terminology in the Igala language within the framework of the Ethnography of Communication and Social Identity Theory. The specific objectives are to identify and categorize the terminologies used for food vendors in the Igala language, analyze how these terminologies reflect and reinforce age and gender hierarchies in Igala society, examine the communicative and cultural meanings attached to vendor naming practices, and investigate emerging neutral or inclusive terms and their implications for linguistic and social change. Finally, one of the objectives is to develop the ATVEGA (Alternative Terminology for Vendors

Excluding Gender and Age) model as a framework for understanding linguistic adaptation and inclusivity in Igala.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ethnography of Communication

The Ethnography of Communication (EoC), developed by Dell Hymes (1962), emphasizes that language must be studied within its *social and cultural context*. It examines how speech, naming, and other linguistic acts express social meanings and how communication is shaped by the norms, participants, and purposes of interaction. Hymes proposed the SPEAKING model, which includes eight components: Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre, as analytical tools for describing communicative events. In this study, the EoC framework is used to interpret Igala food vendor terminology as a form of cultural communication that encodes values, hierarchies, and relationships. For example, terms such as “*Qma oje*” (child of food) and “*Iye oje*” (mother of food) are not only lexical choices but socially meaningful speech acts that reveal how vendors are positioned within the community’s moral and relational order.

- The **Setting** (marketplace, street, or home) defines the context of language use.
- **Participants** (vendors, customers, elders) determine speech roles and levels of respect.
- The **Ends** (purpose) include not only the sale of food but also the reinforcement of age and gender norms.
- **Norms** dictate that younger speakers use deferential terms, while **Key** reflects the emotional tone of respect, teasing, or solidarity.
- The **Genre**, naming conventions, operates as a structured social code through which identity is communicated.

By applying EoC, the study analyzes how the act of naming vendors becomes a *speech event* that both mirrors and sustains Igala social structure. Later sections of analysis draw explicitly on this framework, for instance, when showing how terms such as “*Iye opa*” (mother of groundnut) signal nurturing respect or how neutral forms like “*Ene ki a t’oje*” (“one who sells food”) represent communicative adaptation to new norms.

2.2 Social Identity Theory

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) explains how individuals define themselves in relation to group memberships and how these group identities shape behaviour and communication. According to SIT, people categorize themselves and others into groups (e.g., by gender, age, or occupation), attach emotional value to belonging to those groups, and act in ways that reinforce their group identities. This theory provides a socio-psychological framework for understanding how Igala food vendor terminology serves as a marker of social categorization. Terms like “*Qma*” (child) and “*Iye*” (mother) linguistically classify vendors by age and gender, creating social boundaries between “youth” and “adults,” “men” and “women.” These distinctions reflect not only economic roles but also identity positions that carry prestige, respect, or marginalization.

For example, the use of “*Iye oje*” elevates the vendor’s status by linking her to motherhood and communal care, traits socially valued in Igala society. Conversely, younger vendors called “*Oma oje*” may internalize a lower social status as apprentices or learners. SIT therefore helps to explain how such labels influence both self-perception (how vendors see themselves) and social perception (how others see them). In the analysis, Social Identity Theory is used to interpret the *group identity function* of Igala vendor terminology. It explains how linguistic distinctions produce social cohesion and differentiation, and how the emergence of ATVEGA marks an attempt by younger generations to redefine group boundaries. Neutral forms such as “*Ene ki a t’oje*” symbolize the transition from fixed, traditional group identities towards more inclusive, occupational identities that transcend age and gender.

2.3 Complementarity of Theories

These two frameworks complement each other in this study. The Ethnography of Communication focuses on the cultural and situational use of language how the naming of vendors operates as part of Igala communicative life. The Social Identity Theory, on the other hand, focuses on the social meanings and group dynamics created by that language use. Thus, EoC explains how vendor naming works as a communicative event, while SIT explains why these linguistic distinctions matter for identity construction and social belonging. Their combined application enables a holistic interpretation of the data linking linguistic practice to social identity, and connecting communicative behaviour to cultural meaning. In the analysis that follows, these frameworks guide the discussion of three major thematic areas age and apprenticeship, gender and nurturing roles, and language change and inclusivity each of which demonstrates how vendor naming practices function simultaneously as cultural communication (EoC) and social categorization (SIT).

2.4 Linking the Theoretical Framework to Methodology

The theoretical frameworks outlined above provided the interpretive foundation for the study’s methodological choices. Since both Ethnography of Communication and Social Identity Theory emphasize the relationship between language, context, and social meaning, a qualitative ethnographic approach was adopted to capture the lived experiences and communicative practices of Igala food vendors.

Hymes’ framework guided the study’s focus on *how* and *where* vendor terms are used, highlighting the importance of observing language within its natural communicative environment, the market. This justified the use of participant observation and focus group discussions, which allowed the researcher to document naming practices, speech routines, and social interactions directly. Similarly, Social Identity Theory influenced the study’s attention to *who* uses specific terms and *why*, emphasizing how age, gender, and experience shape linguistic identity. This theoretical lens informed the sampling strategy, ensuring representation across gender and age categories to capture variation in group identity construction.

Together, these theories ensured that the methodology was not merely descriptive but interpretive aimed at uncovering the cultural meanings and identity dynamics encoded in Igala vendor terminology. The data collection and analysis therefore sought not only to catalogue linguistic forms but to interpret how they function as social identifiers and cultural communicative acts within the Igala community.

3. Literature Review

Food vending in Africa has a long history, dating back to pre-colonial times when women played a central role in informal trade networks. The growth of marketplaces and urban centers led to the expansion of food vending as an essential aspect of commerce. According to Clark (1994), West African market women have historically controlled food distribution, ensuring urban populations had access to diverse and nutritious meals. The colonial period further influenced food vending through the introduction of cash economies and urban labor migration, shaping modern vending practices (Robertson, 1984).

The linguistic analysis of food vendor terminology in *Igala* can be contextualized within broader sociolinguistic and cultural studies, which explore how language reflects and shapes social identities, roles, and cultural practices. This literature review synthesizes relevant research and theoretical frameworks that inform the study of food vendor terminology among the *Igala*. Language is a fundamental aspect of individual and collective identity, as it expresses social relations and cultural values (Norton, 2000). In many communities, the terms used to describe various roles, including food vendors, can carry significant social meanings and implications. The concept of language as a marker of identity is critical for understanding the positionality of vendors in *Igala* society, where terms reflect not only their direct roles but also their age and gender identities (Lucy, 2015). The terminology surrounding food vendors is a part of the cultural lexicon that embodies the practices and beliefs of a community. According to Fishman (1972), language serves as a vehicle for community identity and continuity. In the context of *Igala*, food vending is not simply an economic activity but serves as a cultural practice that connects generations and reflects societal hierarchies. Importantly, gender is a crucial dimension of sociolinguistic studies, influencing the ways language is used and understood within communities. Tannen (1990) discusses how language reflects and perpetuates gender roles, a theme evident in the *Igala* terminology for food vendors. The differentiation between young and adult vendors, as well as their association with parental terms, underscores socially constructed gender roles and expectations in food vending. Such linguistic practices reveal the interplay between language, gender, and economic roles (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008).

Age is another significant factor in sociolinguistics that shapes language use and community dynamics. The use of terms that signify youth versus adulthood often denotes power dynamics and respect within a community. For instance, in *Igala* society, the distinction between young food vendors and adult food vendors highlights not only maturity and experience but also societal respect. The emergence of alternative, gender-neutral terminology which this study proposes suggests a shift in societal perceptions and language evolution concerning food vendors. The use of terms like "at'ojẹ" (one who sells food) represents an inclusive linguistic approach that can challenge traditional gender and age distinctions. This linguistic evolution posits that as societies change, so too does the language that reflects their values and identities. Language encodes cultural values, customs, and worldviews. Concepts such as ethnosyntax, ethnosemantics, and ethnopragmatics explore how cultural meanings are embedded in grammar, vocabulary, and communication styles. For example, ethnosyntax examines how syntactic structures reflect cultural attitudes, ethnosemantics investigates how different languages categorize experiences uniquely (e.g., kinship terms and color naming) while ethnopragmatics analyzes culturally specific ways of speaking, such as politeness norms and indirectness in communication (Llamas et al., 2007).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design, consistent with the interpretive nature of the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1962) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) frameworks that underpin it. The design sought to understand how Igala people use language to describe food vendors, and how such linguistic expressions reflect cultural norms, gender relations, and age hierarchies. Ethnography of Communication guided the focus on language in its social context, how naming practices function as part of everyday communication in Igala marketplaces. Social Identity Theory, in turn, provided the analytical basis for understanding how those linguistic practices reinforce or reshape group identities. The combination of these two perspectives justified a field-based qualitative approach emphasizing observation, participation, and interpretation rather than quantification.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised Igala community members, including active food vendors, customers, and local residents familiar with market interactions and naming practices. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that participants represented different age groups, genders, and types of vending (e.g., cooked food, groundnut, kola nut, fish, yam). Participants were deliberately selected based on their linguistic competence and social experience, aligning with Hymes' concept of the "speech community", individuals who share norms for interpreting and using language in specific contexts. In line with Social Identity Theory, the sample reflected diverse social categories (youth/adult, male/female) to capture variations in identity construction through naming.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Two primary qualitative methods were employed: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Participant Observation.

(a) Focus Group Discussions

Three focus group sessions were held in different Igala-speaking communities (Idah, Ankpa, and Anyigba). Each group consisted of 6–8 participants drawn from vendors, customers, and elders. Discussions were conducted in the Igala language to encourage authentic expression and to capture the cultural meanings embedded in the participants' speech.

The FGDs explored:

- The specific terms used to name different food vendors.
- The perceived meanings and connotations of these terms.
- The social and cultural values attached to naming practices.
- Participants' opinions about emerging neutral terms like *Ene ki a t'oje* ("one who sells food").

Following Ethnography of Communication, these discussions were treated as *speech events*, focusing on how people talk about naming and how such talk reflects social norms. In line with Social Identity Theory, attention was given to how participants used or resisted certain labels as part of identity

negotiation. Example of FGD prompt: “What do people mean when they say ‘Iye oje’ or ‘Oma eja’? Does it matter who is selling?”

(b) Participant Observation

The researcher engaged in direct observation of market interactions in the selected communities for several weeks. Observation focused on speech exchanges between vendors and customers, greetings, address forms, and how names or titles were used in real-life contexts.

Field notes captured contextual information about:

- The communicative setting (time, place, participants).
- Tone, gestures, and social relationships evident in vendor-customer interactions.
- How gender and age influenced naming and address patterns.

This ethnographic immersion allowed the researcher to interpret language use *in situ*, consistent with Hymes’ emphasis on observing the **Setting, Participants, and Key** of communication. It also provided insight into how individuals *perform group identity*, a key element of Social Identity Theory.

4.4 Method of Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through focus group discussions and market observations is analyzed thematically to uncover how Igala food vendor terminology reflects social identity, age hierarchy, and gender roles. The analysis is organized around three major themes that emerged from participants’ narratives and linguistic practices. Each theme is discussed with illustrative quotes and field observations to foreground participants’ voices and interpret their socio-cultural meanings within the Igala community.

5.0 Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Terms for Food Vendors in Igala

Young Food Vendors (+Male +Female)			Older Food Vendors (+Female)		
Terms	Direct Interpretation	Intended Meaning	Terms	Direct Interpretation	Intended Meaning
Oma oje	Child of food	Food Vendor	Iye oje	Mother of food	Food Vendor
Oma obi	Child of colanut	Cola nut Vendor	Iye obi	Mother of colanut	Cola nut Vendor
Oma opa	Child of groundnut	Groundnut Vendor	Iye opa	Mother of groundnut	Groundnut Vendor
Oma eja	Child of fish	Fish Vendor	Iye eja	Mother of fish	Fish Vendor

Qma uchu	Child of yam	Yam Vendor	Iye uchu	Mother of yam	Yam Vendor
Qma akpa	Child of corn	Corn Vendor	Iye akpa	Mother of corn	Corn Vendor

Theme 1: Age and Apprenticeship in Vendor Naming

In Igala society, age is a crucial factor in defining social identity. This is reflected linguistically in vendor terminologies that distinguish between young and adult sellers. Terms such as “*Qma oje*” (child of food) and “*Qma eja*” (child of fish) are used for young vendors, while “*Iye oje*” (mother of food) or “*Iye eja*” (mother of fish) refer to older, more experienced women.

Participant 2 (female, 50 years): “*We call them ‘oma’ because they are still learning. When you have sold for long and people respect your food, you become ‘Iye’.*”

This distinction demonstrates how naming functions as a communicative act that situates speakers within an age-based social order. Applying Hymes’ Ethnography of Communication, the naming process here reflects the “*N*” (*Norms*) and “*P*” (*Participants*) elements of the **SPEAKING model**. Language choices are culturally regulated and signal respect, apprenticeship, and social growth. The exchange between vendors and buyers, where older women are addressed as “*Iye mi*” (“my mother”), further illustrates how speech events embody relational meaning. Within Hymes’ framework, this is not just vocabulary but an ethnographic code of respect that reinforces social order through communicative practice. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, these linguistic markers serve as *identity badges*, distinguishing novices (*Qma*) from experienced community members (*Iye*). Age-based labels thus function as group identifiers through which individuals derive social recognition. Vendors internalize these labels to affirm belonging and to navigate social expectations in the market space.

Theme 2: Gender and Nurturing Roles in Market Identity

Gendered language emerged as another key dimension in the data. Female vendors are often referred to with maternal titles such as “*Iye oje*” (“mother of food”) or “*Iye opa*” (“mother of groundnut”), which convey respect, maturity, and care. Male vendors, however, are rarely addressed with equivalent paternal titles; rather, older male food vendors receive titles that do not emphasize their familial status, indicating a potential societal expectation for men to be seen as independent or as providers.

Participant 1 (male, 42 years): “*They call women ‘Iye oje,’ but for us men, they just say our name. People still think cooking and selling food belong to women.*”

This gendered asymmetry confirms Social Identity Theory’s principle that group identities are constructed through social categorization. In this case, language acts as the mechanism for distinguishing the female caregiving identity group from the male economic actor group. The use of maternal titles creates a *positive social identity* for women, but also limits them to culturally prescribed nurturing roles. At the same time, the finding aligns with Hymes’ Ethnography of Communication, where the “*E*” (*Ends*) and “*K*”

(Key) elements of the SPEAKING model show that naming carries social functions beyond literal description. It communicates affection, respect, and communal solidarity. Calling a vendor “Iye” transforms economic activity into a relational act, linking commerce with kinship and moral obligation. Observation in Idah market revealed that older female vendors often mediate disputes and offer food on credit, behaviours consistent with the “mother” role encoded in the language. Thus, gendered naming practices are both *linguistic performances* and *social enactments* of Igala femininity.

Theme 3: Language Change and the Emergence of ATVEGA (Neutral Terminology)

As modernization and egalitarian values influence Igala society, participants increasingly favour neutral terms such as “*Ene ki a t’oje*” (“one who sells food”) instead of age- or gender-marked expressions. This tendency gave rise to the concept of **ATVEGA** as a more inclusive linguistic framework. ATVEGA is a linguistic framework proposed in the study to create more inclusive and neutral terms for food vendors in Igala society. Unlike traditional terms that emphasize gender and age distinctions such as “*Oma oje*” (child of food vendor) or “*Iye oje*” (mother of food vendor) ATVEGA employs systematic and neutral vocabulary to describe vendors, thus removing gender and age markers from the terminology. The core structure of ATVEGA involves combining the word “Ene” (meaning “person”) with the fixed verb phrase “*ki a t’*” (meaning “who sells”) and the noun for the specific commodity sold, forming a predictable pattern such as “*Ene ki a t’oje*” (someone who sells food). This framework promotes inclusivity by encompassing all vendors regardless of their gender or age, reflecting contemporary societal shifts towards gender neutrality and broader participation in marketplace activities. Overall, ATVEGA represents a linguistic adaptation to modern values, emphasizing social inclusivity and equality while maintaining clarity about the vendor's role through specific commodity identifiers.

Participant 6 (male, 27 years): “*We just say ‘Ene ki a t’oje.’ It fits everyone, not just women or elders.*”

The creation of **ATVEGA** represents a conscious linguistic innovation aligned with Hymes’ (1962) “Instrumentalities” and “Genre” parameters. Speakers are actively modifying the communicative codes of their culture to reflect new social realities, demonstrating how language adapts within its ethnographic context. From the lens of Social Identity Theory, the adoption of ATVEGA terms signifies a redefinition of group membership. Vendors no longer see themselves as belonging to narrow categories of “mothers” or “children” but as part of an inclusive occupational identity, “*Ene ki a t’oje*” as a shared, gender-neutral group marker. This linguistic shift exemplifies the theory’s central idea that social identity is dynamic, and that individuals reconstruct it in response to changing social norms.

Participant 3 (female, 31 years): “*When people call me ‘Iye eja,’ I feel old. I prefer to be known for what I sell, not my gender.*”

Observation in Idah market confirmed this linguistic shift: some vendors used forms such as “*Ene ki a t’uchu*” (“one who sells yam”) or its contracted variant “*A t’uchu*.” These emerging forms reflect a pragmatic adaptation to modern sensibilities, removing social markers of age and gender while maintaining communicative clarity. The ATVEGA structure: Ene + ki a t’ + [item sold] not only modernizes Igala vendor naming but also symbolizes a linguistic response to social change. From an ethnographic

perspective, this transformation exemplifies what Hymes (1962) called the *dynamic function of communication*, where language evolves alongside shifting social norms.

Participant 4 (female, 40 years): “*Language is changing. Our children say ‘Ene ki a t’obi’ instead of ‘Iye obi.’ It still means the same thing*”

This adaptation shows how Igala speakers negotiate tradition and inclusivity, balancing respect for cultural continuity with openness to change. Linguistically, ATVEGA demonstrates morphological productivity, while sociologically it embodies collective identity reconstruction a move from specific to universal naming. Thus, ATVEGA encapsulates both a linguistic transformation (as per Ethnography of Communication) and a social reclassification (as per Social Identity Theory). It shows how communicative practice becomes a site of cultural negotiation where Igala speakers use language not only to reflect identity but to reshape it.

Besides, the naming system also reflects an age hierarchy within the community. Young vendors are identified as "children of" the respective food item they sell, which implies a learning or apprentice role in the trade. This structure of naming suggests that older community members are respected for their experience and knowledge, while younger individuals are in a stage of growth and development. Furthermore, the use of familial terms in naming food vendors emphasizes the community's reliance on family and communal ties. Terms that incorporate familial relationships (like oma-“child” and iye-“mother”) suggest that food vending is not just an economic activity but also something that reinforces family unit connections and community cohesion. This indicates a societal value placed on supporting one another within familial and communal structures. In summary, the terminology for food vendors in the *Igala* language not only serves to identify the vendors but also encapsulates vital aspects of gender roles, age hierarchy, familial bonds, and inclusivity, reflecting the community's social values, structures and identity.

5.1 Reflexivity Note / Researcher’s Positionality

As an Igala speaker and cultural insider, the researcher’s familiarity with local norms and linguistic practices facilitated deep engagement with participants. This insider perspective enhanced access to subtle meanings and community trust but also required reflexivity to avoid interpretive bias. Field notes were compared with FGD transcripts and validated through informal follow-up conversations to ensure reliability. Occasionally, participants became more cautious or playful when the researcher asked about gendered terms, revealing how language use shifts under observation. Such reflexive encounters were treated as part of the ethnographic data, illustrating how meanings are co-constructed between researcher and participants. This positional awareness underscores that the interpretation presented here emerges from a shared cultural space, one where the researcher participates in, rather than merely observes, the ongoing evolution of Igala linguistic identity.

Image 1: Depicts Age and Apprenticeship in Vendor Naming



Image 2: Depicts Gender and Nurturing Roles in Market Identity



5.1 ATVEGA Analysis

ATVEGA is a linguistic framework proposed in this study to create more inclusive and neutral terms for food vendors in Igala. Unlike traditional terms that emphasize gender and age distinctions such as "Oma oje" (child of food vendor) or "Iye oje" (mother of food vendor) ATVEGA employs systematic and neutral vocabulary to describe vendors, thus removing gender and age markers from the terminology. The core structure of ATVEGA involves combining the word "Ene" (meaning "person") with the fixed verb phrase "ki a t'" (meaning "who sells") and the noun for the specific commodity sold, forming a predictable pattern such as "Ene ki a t'oje" (someone who sells food). This framework promotes inclusivity by encompassing

all vendors regardless of their gender or age, reflecting contemporary societal shifts towards gender neutrality and broader participation in marketplace activities. Overall, ATVEGA represents a linguistic adaptation to modern values, emphasizing social inclusivity and equality while maintaining clarity about the vendor's role through specific commodity identifiers.

Table 2: ATVEGA Phrases

Commodity	ATVEGA 1 Noun Phrase	ATVEGA 2 Contracted Noun Phrase	Direct Meaning	The English Meaning
Oje- “swallow”	Ene ki a t’oje	A t’oje	Seller of food	Food Vendor
Obi-colanut	Ene ki a t’obi	A t’obi	Seller of cola nut	Colanut Vendor
Opa-groudnut	Ene ki at’opa	A t’opa	Seller of groundnut	G/nut Vendor
Eja-fish	Eneki a t’ēja	A t’ēja	Seller of fish	Fish Vendor
Uchu-yam	Ene ki a t’uchu	A t’uchu	Seller of yam	Yam Vendor
Akpa-corn	Ene ki a t’akpa	A t’akpa	Seller of corn	Corn Vendor
Akpo-Pepper	Ene ki a t’akpo	at’a kpo	Seller of pepper	Pepper Vendor

5.2 ATVEGA Linguistic Productivity Rule

Definition: ATVEGA vendor terms follow a fixed structure while removing gender and age distinctions. This rule ensures that ATVEGA vendor names are both systematically structured and free from gender/age biases, making them linguistically productive and socially inclusive.

Formula: Ene + ki a t’ + [item sold]

Where:

- a. **Ene** = Person (+ ANIMATE + HUMAN + MALE/FEMALE - AGE).
- b. **ki a t’** = "Who sells" (a fixed verb phrase).
- c. **[Item sold]** = Noun representing the product.

Key Features:

- a. **Predictable & Productive Structure** → Every vendor name follows the same pattern.
- b. **Neutral & Inclusive** → No gender (male/female) or age (child/adult) markers are included.

Examples:

Traditional Term	ATVEGA Term (Neutral & Systematic)
Iye eja (mother of fish) →	Ene + ki a t' + [eja] [Someone who sells fish]
Oma eja (Child of fish vendor) →	Ene + ki a t' + [eja] [Someone who sells fish]

5.3 Application of ATVEGA Linguistic Productive Rule

a. Ene ki a t'oje (Vendor of Food)

The phrase " Ene ki a t'oje " can be broken down into its individual components:

Ene → "Person" → "Who" (used as a relative pronoun) Ki
a t' → "Sells" (a contraction of "a ta," meaning "to sell")
oje → "Any form of swallow"

Thus, the literal meaning of "Ene ki a t'oje" is "one who sells food." A vendor of food refers to an individual whose main occupation or trade is the sale of cooked food. This could be in various forms, such as street food vendor who sells cooked meals such as snacks, local delicacies, or full meals, from roadside stalls, open markets, or small kiosks. They could also be restaurant or canteen owners who operates a small eatery or a food canteen where meals are served to customers. Sometimes they are mobile food sellers who move around with food items, either carrying them on their head, using a pushcart, or selling from a vehicle. In many typical *Igala* communities, food vendors play crucial roles in everyday life. Traditional food vendors provide quick, affordable, and often locally made meals to workers, students, artisans and travelers. Food vending in *Igala* culture is often associated with women, particularly market women who inherit the trade from previous generations. However, men also engage in food vending, especially in specific food businesses like meat roasting (suya sellers).

b. Ene ki a t'obi (Vendor of Kola nut)

In *Igala* language, *Ene ki a t'obi* is a phrase that directly translates to "one who sells kola nut" where *ene* means "person" or "one who..." while *ki a t'* can be interpreted as "sells" or "trades in" and *obi* refers to kola nut, a culturally significant item in many African societies. **In cultural context**, kola nut (*obi*) holds a sacred and social significance among the *Igala* people, as well as in many other West African cultures. It is used in rituals, traditional ceremonies, and as a symbol of hospitality. In *Igala* society, kola nuts are often presented to guests as a sign of goodwill and respect. They also play a role in marriage ceremonies, religious offerings, and dispute resolution (Iyere, 2011) . Therefore, a vendor of kola nuts, or *Ene ki a t'obi*, serves an essential function within the community. Such individuals are responsible for ensuring a steady supply of kola nuts for both everyday consumption and ceremonial use. They may operate in markets, serve as intermediaries between kola nut farmers and consumers, or even be specialized traders who distribute kola nuts across different regions. In economic importance, the trade in kola nuts is a source of livelihood for

many people. Vendors may buy kola nuts in bulk from farmers and resell them in smaller quantities. In some cases, they engage in cross-regional trade, supplying kola nuts to areas where they are less abundant. Socially, the vendor does not just sell a product; they provide a culturally significant commodity that strengthens social bonds. By supplying kola nuts, they facilitate traditional practices and uphold the customs of the Igala people. Beyond its economic and social roles, *Ene ki a t'obi* can also symbolize a person who brings people together. Since kola nuts are often shared during gatherings, the vendor indirectly contributes to social unity and cultural continuity. In summary, *Ene ki a t'obi* refers to more than just a trader; it represents an important cultural role within Igala society. The kola nut vendor ensures the availability of a product that is deeply woven into the social and spiritual fabric of the community.

c. *Ene ki a t'opa* (Vendor of Groundnut)

The phrase *Ene ki a t'opa* follows a similar linguistic structure to *Ene ki a t'obi* (vendor of kola nut earlier discussed). Breaking it down: **Ene** means “one who” or “a person” and it identifies an individual in relation to an action. **ki a t'** represents “sells” or “engages in the trade of.” It is a functional verb phrase that conveys the act of selling. **Opa** is the *Igala* word for “groundnut” (peanut). The structure of *Ene ki a t'opa* follows a pattern commonly found in *Igala* language for describing professions or roles based on trade. Similar formations include:

<i>Ene</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>t'obi</i>	–	Vendor	of	kola	nut
<i>Ene</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>t'uchu</i>	–	Vendor	of	yam	
<i>Ene ki a t'abacha</i> – Vendor of cassava								

This formulaic structure reflects a productive linguistic rule for denoting occupational or trade-related roles by specifying the item being sold after the verb phrase while excluding the gender and age of the vendor. Groundnut (*opa*) is a staple agricultural product in *Igala* society, widely consumed and traded. Vendors of groundnut (*Ene ki a t'opa*) play a key role in local economies by facilitating the distribution of this valuable crop. The trade in groundnuts extends beyond local markets to interregional commerce, contributing to both subsistence and commercial livelihoods. Groundnuts are an important source of protein and fat in *Igala* cuisine. They are eaten raw, roasted, boiled, or processed into peanut butter and groundnut oil. They are also used in soups, snacks, and traditional dishes. Thus, groundnuts, like kola nuts, are sometimes shared during communal gatherings, reinforcing social bonds. They are used in informal gift-giving, often exchanged among friends, neighbors, and visitors as a gesture of goodwill. *Ene ki a t'opa* is typically a small-scale trader, often found in local markets or along roadsides selling roasted or boiled groundnuts. Many vendors are women, who dominate petty trading in *Igala* society and contribute significantly to household economies. The sale of groundnuts provides an accessible business opportunity for many, requiring relatively low capital investment compared to other trades. While both kola nut (*obi*) and groundnut (*opa*) vendors are important, there are some distinctions in their trade. **Kola Nut Vendors** primarily serve ritual, ceremonial, and social functions. Kola nuts are deeply embedded in traditional customs of the Igala people, including marriage rites, hospitality, and spiritual offerings. On the other hand, **groundnut vendors** play a more economic and nutritional role, as groundnuts are primarily consumed as food rather than used in rituals. Therefore, the phrase *Ene ki a t'opa* encapsulates both a linguistic structure and a socio-economic reality in *Igala* culture. Linguistically, it follows a systematic pattern used for naming vendors based on their trade. Socio-culturally, it reflects the significance of groundnut as both a nutritional

staple and a commodity that sustains small-scale traders. While not as deeply ritualistic as kola nuts, groundnuts remain an integral part of *Igala* daily life, and their vendors are key figures in market economies.

d. *Ene ki a t'ēja* (Vendor of Fish)

The phrase *Ene ki a t'ēja* follows the same structural pattern as other *Igala* trade-related phrases. This shows how **Ene ki a t'ēja** follows a subject-predicate structure, with "ki a t'" acting as the verb phrase. The phrase follows a predictable pattern for describing occupations in *Igala*. The structure is: *Ene ki a t' + [name of item sold]*. This shows a productive morphological rule in *Igala* where vendor-related occupations are formed by combining *Ene* (person) with *ki a t'* (sells) and the noun for the product being sold. The structure remains flexible and applies to various trades. In **Socio-Cultural and Economic Significance of Fish Trade**, fish (*ēja*) is an important source of protein and a major commodity in *Igala* society, particularly in communities near rivers and water bodies. The trade in fish supports both subsistence and commercial livelihoods, making vendors of fish (*Ene ki a t'ēja*) an integral part of local economies. Fish vendors operate at different levels: Some sell fresh fish caught daily from rivers and lakes. Others sell smoked or dried fish, which has a longer shelf life and can be transported to distant markets. Many fish vendors are women, who dominate petty trading in *Igala* society. Fish is symbolic in *Igala* tradition Fish is sometimes associated with fertility and abundance due to its natural reproduction process. In some cases, dried fish is used in traditional gift-giving, particularly as part of marriage negotiations and dowries.

The phrase *Ene ki a t'ēja* is both a linguistic construct and a reflection of *Igala* society. Linguistically, it follows a systematic pattern for naming vendors based on their trade. Socio-culturally, fish vendors play a crucial role in providing food, sustaining livelihoods, and contributing to economic stability. Though not as symbolically significant as kola nuts, fish remains essential in daily *Igala* life, and its vendors are key figures in market transactions and community sustenance.

e. *Ene ki a t'uchu* (Vendor of Yam)

The phrase *Ene ki a t'uchu* follows the established ATVEGA linguistic structure in naming vendors and traders. In morphological and syntactic pattern, this phrase fits within a broader pattern to describe different types of vendors while excluding gender and age. This follows a phrasal structure: *Ene ki a t' + [name of item sold]* **broken-down as:**

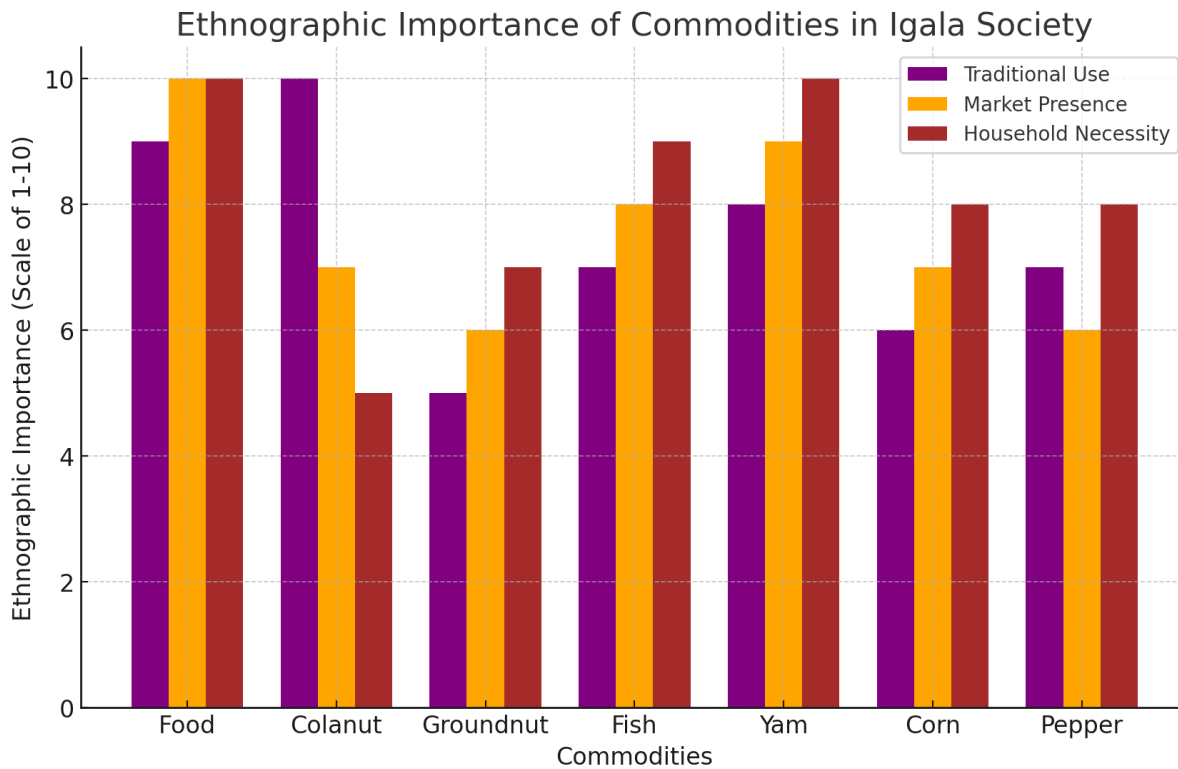
- a. **Ene** – "one who" or "a person," identifying the subject as an individual engaged in a specific action.
- b. **ki a t'** – This phrase means "sells" or "trades in." It is a verb phrase used to describe commercial activity.
- c. **uchu** – This is the *Igala* word for "yam," a staple food in *Igala* society.

This structure demonstrates a productive linguistic rule in *Igala* for forming occupational nouns by combining a noun (*Ene*), a verb phrase (*ki a t'*), and a noun indicating the product being sold (*uchu*). In terms of **socio-cultural cum economic importance of yam in Igala society**, yam (*uchu*) is one of the most significant agricultural products in *Igala* culture. It is not just a food item but also a symbol of wealth, status, and prosperity. The trade in yam is vital to the local economy, with vendors (*Ene ki a t'uchu*) playing a key role in distributing this essential crop. Yam is a primary food source in *Igala* society, used in meals such as

pounded yam (ọjẹ-uchu), yam porridge (ijolo), and roasted yam. It is a key ingredient in both everyday meals and special occasions. Yam is highly revered in *Igala* tradition, symbolizing prosperity, fertility, and sustenance. The **New Yam Festival (Echane Uchu)** is an annual celebration marking the harvest of yams. This festival is significant in *Igala* culture, and yam vendors contribute to its success by supplying yams for communal feasts and rituals. In traditional society, a man's wealth was often measured by the size of his yam barns (*Aka Uchu*), making yam trade a lucrative business. In conclusion, the phrase *Ene ki a t'uchu* is more than just a linguistic expression—it reflects an essential socio-economic role in *Igala* society. Linguistically, it follows a productive pattern for naming vendors based on their trade. Culturally, yam is a highly valued crop, with vendors playing a crucial role in its distribution, storage, and trade. Given yam's deep connection to status, festivals, and economic prosperity, *Ene ki a t'uchu* holds both commercial and symbolic importance in *Igala* culture.

f. *Ene ki a t'akpa* (Vendor of Corn)

The phrase *Ene ki a t'akpa* follows a consistent grammatical pattern used in *Igala* to describe vendors and traders. The structure of *Ene ki a t'akpa* follows a formulaic pattern as described earlier: *Ene ki a t' + [name of item sold]*. This pattern reflects a productive linguistic structure in *Igala* that systematically constructs occupational nouns by combining a noun (*Ene*), a verb phrase (*ki a t'*), and the noun for the product being sold (*akpa*). This formation excludes the gender and the age of vendors. Corn (*akpa*) is an essential crop in *Igala* society, grown both for subsistence and commercial purposes. It is widely consumed and traded in different forms: **Fresh corn** is sold during harvest season, either boiled or roasted as a popular street food. The roasting and selling of corn is a common sight in *Igala* communities, often forming part of the informal economy dominated by the female folks. **Dried corn** is processed into flour for making staple foods such as [*oje, ekamu, aicha, etc.*] cornmeal porridge. Vendors of corn (*Ene ki a t'akpa*) play a crucial role in the food supply chain, ensuring that corn reaches consumers in various forms. In conclusion, the ATVEGA- *Ene ki a t'akpa* is more than just a linguistic construct—it reflects a significant socio-economic activity in *Igala* society. Linguistically, it follows a predictable pattern used for naming vendors in *Igala*. Socio-culturally, corn vendors contribute to food accessibility, economic sustainability, and seasonal commerce. While corn may not hold the same ceremonial importance as kola nut or yam, its trade remains essential for daily sustenance and income generation, particularly for women and small-scale traders.



The bar chart above visually represents the ethnographic importance of some key commodities in *Igala* society based on three factors:

- i. Traditional Use (Purple): The role of the commodity in rituals, ceremonies, and cultural practices.
 - a. Colanut (Obi) has the highest traditional importance, likely due to its use in ceremonies and social events.
 - b. Food (Oje) and Yam (Uchu) also rank high, given their role in cultural feasts and traditional meals.
- ii. Market Presence (Orange): How commonly the commodity is sold in *Igala* markets.
 - a. Food (oje-swallow), Yam (uchu), and Fish (Eja) are widely available and traded frequently.
 - b. Groundnut (Opa) and Pepper (Akpo) have moderate market presence.
- iii. Household Necessity (Brown): How essential the commodity is in daily meals.
 - a. Food (Oje) and Yam (Uchu) score the highest, reflecting their staple status.
 - b. Fish (Eja) and Corn (Akpa) are also important daily food sources.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that Igala food vendor terminology functions as both a linguistic system and a social mirror, encoding values of age, gender, and communal interdependence. Participant voices revealed a complex negotiation between tradition and transformation: older vendors maintain respect for maternal titles, while younger traders embrace neutral forms. This duality confirms Hymes' (1962) assertion that communication is culturally situated and constantly evolving. It also supports Social Identity Theory's view that language reflects group belonging and shifts as communities redefine identity boundaries. The proposed

ATVEGA framework embodies this evolution, a synthesis of linguistic inclusivity and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the Igala marketplace emerges as both an economic and semiotic space where language, identity, and social order intersect. By integrating participants' voices and reflexive ethnographic insight, this study reaffirms that the Igala language remains a living archive of its people's adaptive resilience and collective identity.

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