

Running a Business in a Multilingual Community: A Case of Oshiwambo-Speaking ‘Monolingual’ Women Food Vendors in Katutura

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Abstract

The study investigated the linguistic experiences of the women food vendors in the informal sector in Katutura who identified themselves as monolingual speakers of the Oshiwambo language. The aim was to explore how the business activities of these women are affected by their inability to speak an additional language. The aim was to establish how monolingual women manage to run their businesses in a multilingual setting. The study was qualitative, and the instruments used consisted of a questionnaire that solicited the linguistic repertoires, biographic information, and contact details of the participants and semi-structured interviews to discuss the participants’ language experiences concerning their business activities in the market. The study revealed that the participants were, in fact, not monolingual because they knew other languages in their repertoires; the participants’ business activities were not hindered by their inability to speak an additional language fluently because they mix words of the languages in their linguistic repertoire to communicate instead of speaking in one language.

Keywords: monolingualism, linguistic repertoire, metrolingualism, informal sector

Introduction

When the researcher conducted a Ph.D. study on the linguistic repertoire of national and international migrants in Windhoek in 2018, which was widely distributed to 400 vendors in the informal sector, she came across participants who identified as monolingual speakers of the Oshiwambo language which prompted the need for this study because numerous scholars argued that there are no more monolingual people (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015; Busch, 2012). Furthermore, an earlier study by Prah (2010) which was conducted in Katutura and surveyed the language use of 100 participants revealed that most participants were multilingual and that the majority of them speak up to four languages, however, three participants were monolingual. Prah’s study did not go into detail about the repertoires of those who were found monolingual. Given that background, the researcher found it necessary to study the linguistic repertoire of the women food vendors who identify as monolingual in the questionnaire. The participants are referred to as monolingual in this article not because the study believed them to be monolingual but because that is how they described themselves in the questionnaire. In some instances, the participants are referred to as those with limited linguistic repertoire because the metrolingualism framework that informed this study focuses on the linguistic resources of speakers to refer to speakers’ language knowledge; thus, referred to as having a limited repertoire because they know a few languages.

Katutura is more multilingual than the rest of Windhoek, however, not all dwellers are multilingual (Prah, 2010). The linguistic context in an African multilingual context differs from that in Europe; in countries such as Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium, all languages can be used equally in all the domains for various purposes, while in Africa, different languages are required in certain domains for various purposes (Prah, 2010). Basara (2005) in a survey done by the American Council on Education (ACE) explained the vitality of being multilingual as a skill that is competitive in the global economy. This prompted the need to investigate how the activities of the vendors who speak one language are affected (or not affected) in domains where they lack a required language.

As in most African countries, multilingualism in Namibia is more of an urban phenomenon than a rural one (Prah, 2010). Namibia is a densely populated country. Generally, in rural areas, speech communities live in one geographical region, for instance in rural areas in Oshana, Oshikoto, and Ohangwena regions, there are mostly Oshiwambo-speaking people. In rural areas in Kavango East and West, there are mostly speakers of the Rukavango dialects (Cf. Ethnologue, 2022). As a result, people who spent most of their lives in rural areas may not be exposed to various languages and have limited linguistic repertoires. Debates have been going on about whether certain languages are dialects or languages; this study avoided the classification of language into dialects – an approach that Busch (2012) encourages – and Oshiwambo is referred to without going further into dialects.

The study investigated the linguistic repertoire of the women food vendors as they narrate their everyday practices in the informal sector. The purpose was to explore how the daily business activities of these women are affected by their inability to speak an additional language. The linguistic mechanism employed by those with limited linguistic repertoires to keep their business afloat where the knowledge of the various language could be resourceful is not known in the context of the informal sector in Namibia. There seems to be no study that presents empirical data to explain how monolingual speakers navigate social space in the multilingual informal sector in Namibia. The study was based on the following three research questions:

1. How is the linguistic repertoire of the women food vendors, who described themselves as monolingual, reflected in the interview discussions?
2. How does the inability to speak an additional language hinder (or not hinder) the business activities of the women's food vendors?
3. What are the mechanisms employed by the woman food vendors who have a limited linguistic repertoire to keep their business activities thriving in the multilingual space?

Languages in Windhoek and Katutura

Namibia attained its independence in 1990 and abolished all the apartheid laws which resulted in a wave of people migrating from rural areas to Windhoek and other urban centres (Crush, Williams, & Peberdy, 2005). The Namibian constitution declared English as the sole official language although it has not much history in Namibia before independence (Stell, 2014). The influx of people to the capital led to some significant linguistic transformations:

The number of different languages encountered in Windhoek increased because of migration. Census 2011 identifies Oshiwambo, Afrikaans, Khoekhoegowab (Nama/Damara), and Herero as the languages widely spoken in Windhoek (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2012). However, the current linguistic picture in terms of languages spoken in Windhoek is likely to be different from the 2011 Census findings because of urbanisation. Most Namibian people cannot speak other ethnic Namibian languages beyond their own (Dolgunsöz, 2013); as a result, English has become the most visible language in the country as it holds overt prestige (Stell & Dragojevic, 2017); English is a lingua franca in Namibia, even if many attest to having low levels of English proficiency.

According to Census (2011), 41 percent of the Windhoek population are Aawambo whose ethnic language is Oshiwambo (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2012). Its strong demographic position and

institutional support – as it historically dominated the ruling party (Elischer, 2013) – made Oshiwambo a relatively high-vitality group in Windhoek. However, before the independence of Namibia, its socio-economic status was low. Afrikaans became a medium-vitality language mainly because of its inherited status from the past of being the country's official language before independence (Stell & Dragojevic, 2017), and its socioeconomic status is higher than Oshiwambo because the economic power is still in the hand of the white population, who are the ethnic speakers of Afrikaans (Stell & Dragojevic, 2017).

Katutura became more multilingual than the rest of Windhoek (Prah, 2010). Over the years, Katutura has grown into massive urban suburbs that accommodate different language communities as this is where speakers of many African languages, both Namibian and international languages, live. The cost of setting up a house and/or a business in the Katutura informal settlement is cheaper than building a house in formal suburbs. As a result, many national and international migrants of low incomes are accommodated in informal settlements in Katutura.

Theoretical framework: metrolingualism

Pennycook and Otsuji's (2015) notion of metrolingualism informed this study. Metrolingualism is an extension of metroethnicity (Maher, 2015) that investigates the language practices in the city. In the book *Metrolingualism: Language in the city* (2015), Pennycook and Otsuji framed the notion as they discussed language practices in various workplaces in Sydney and Japan: cafés, restaurants, shop streets, markets, and construction sites.

Narrating the language experience observed in the market, Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) mention that marketplaces are busy, with people performing different kinds of business activities; while language is important as a medium through which business transactions are communicated, the correctness of language is not a concern as it is in formal employment. It is the nature of how language is used concerning business operations that Pennycook and Otsuji (2015:2) referred to it as metrolingual multitasking – 'how linguistic resources, everyday tasks, social space are intertwined'. Speakers use all kinds of languages; they draw from their linguistic resources, which Busch (2012) referred to as linguistic repertoire. Blommaert (2009, p. 425) defines linguistic repertoire as 'the real bits and chunks of language' speakers draw from. It is this perspective that some contemporary sociolinguists advocate for the approach that looks at language beyond classifying and naming (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Heller, 2010) as other current trends, i.e. migration change language dynamics, especially in less formal settings. Therefore, the vendors' repertoires were studied concerning their daily practices in the market.

In the market, the aim is business; language styles and registers are modified to suit the context and customers; the quality of products, prices, personal relationships, and business skills are as important as language in the market (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). Like many scholars who discredit monolingualism, Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) explain that monolingualism is a myth, not a linguistic reality but rather an ideology. The previous scholars explained that the conceptualisation of monolingualism has no significant contribution to the study of linguistics because it is mainly about the enumeration of languages without suggesting solutions to the problem of knowing only one language. Canagarajah (2013, p. 8) earlier raised similar sentiments that 'if languages are always in contact and communication always involves a negation of mobile codes, we have to ask if the term

monolingual has anything more than an academic and ideological significance'. It is on that basis that this study relied on Pennycook and Otsuji's (2015) notion as the approach to direct the investigation of language practices of the women food vendors directly in their natural settings, the informal sector.

Methodology

The participants who formed part of this article were found in Katutura; a low-income township that started in the 1960s. The participants were vendors in informal businesses that focus mostly on food trading to satisfy the quick needs of the people. Some vendors are accommodated in the municipality's open market, but all participants operate in temporary structures (and a few under the tree) in the open spaces next to their shack houses. Only one participant was found a distance from her house next to the construction site.

The original study from which the data of this article is derived had two sets of data: the questionnaire and the interview phase: The questionnaire solicited metadata on the linguistic repertoires, biographical information, and contact details of 440 participants. The researcher recruited students that were trained to assist with the distribution of the questionnaire; Microsoft Excel was used to document the questionnaire data. Among the participants, some indicated that they were monolingual: 12 Namibian and nine Angolan nationals. Among the Namibian nationals, eight Oshiwambo-speaking women sell food. All eight women food vendors were invited for the semi-interview because of their commonality – being women food vendors who speak Oshiwambo. However, only five were available and agreed to participate in the interview and were, thus, interviewed. The interview schedule was drawn up which was mostly for the participants to further explain the information they provided in the questionnaire. The interviews were semi-structured and covered topics on language use, business activities, trajectories, and language narratives; the participants were free to change the topic if there was a need to explain the idea. The interview began with verifying the data each participant provided in the questionnaire.

Participants were interviewed at their businesses (workstations) rather than in any other formal setup, to avoid possibly intimidating them and thus not providing authentic information. The interviewer sat beside the participants at their business place during the interview. The study purpose was explained and consent for that which was written in Oshiwambo was signed. All the participants could read and write in Oshiwambo. The data from the interview were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

The participants' names are pseudonyms chosen by the researcher. The table below summarises the age and years in Windhoek and the region where the participants are originally from.

Table 1: Participants, age, and interview duration

Participants	Duration of interview	Age	Years in Windhoek	Region of origin
Martha	50 minutes	44	2 years and 3 months	Omusati
Justine	46 minutes	40	2 years and 1-month	Omusati
Ndapewa	48 minutes	52	1 years and 4 months	Omusati
Ester	43 minutes	51	8 months	Ohangwena
Anna	40 minutes	46	9 months	Oshikoto

- (Now that you are here, who is staying with your children at home?)
- Line 10: Ester: Ondi li noka cousin kange ka dalwa kumeme mumwayina nameme. Oko haka kala navo. Maar fimbo limwe ohandi va fiye puushinda ngeenge kaadona aya kofikola, koNAMCOL.
- (I am with my cousin whose mother is a sister to my mother (auntie). She is the one who stays with them. But sometimes I leave them with the neighbours when the girl goes to school, at Namcol.)

As shown in the extract above, Ester had a few vocabularies of other languages, English and Afrikaans, although her utterances were entirely in the Oshiwambo language, in line 10 she used the word 'cousin' (English) and 'maar' (Afrikaans); maar means 'but' in English.

Another participant, Justine, spoke entirely in Oshiwambo except in one instance when she repeated the word that the researcher used in the question. Extract 3 below is from Justine's interview:

- Line 11 Justine: Owu shi kutya piinima ohandi kala nale nda nyola po omwaalu gwiinima.
(her repertoire and the vocabulary of none-Oshiwambo which are in her repertoire are active because You know I already have the prices written next to the products.)
- Line 12 Res: Oo, Onumber opo yi li nale?
(The number is already there?)
- Line 13 Justine: Ee, Ohandi nyola po aike eenumber.
(Yes, I have already written down the numbers).

Justine had some knowledge of the English language because in line 13 she affirmed an English word 'Onumber' that the researcher used as a content word in line 12; she was repeating the word correctly when she affirmed 'eenumber' (line 13). The vowel 'o' added to 'number' is to symbolise its singular case while 'ee' is to symbolise the plural case.

Justine seemed to have a strong command of Oshiwambo because at the beginning she used the word 'omwaalu' which means 'the number'. The word "Omwaalu" is a deep Oshiwambo word that is mostly used by those who have a strong command of the Oshiwambo language. Those whose knowledge of Oshiwambo is not strong are likely to refer to 'emwaalu' as 'Oonumba', as referred to in line 12 by the researcher and used in affirmation in line 13 by the participant. Justine was never in other urban centres before coming to Windhoek; she came straight from the rural area.

The repertoire of Ndapewa and Anna seemed like that of Justine – discussed above. Although Ndapewa mentioned in the questionnaire that she is monolingual, in the interview she explained that she has a vocabulary of other languages although limited. Extract 4 below explains:

- Line 14 Res: Paife eshi we ya movenduka, ino diladila nande kutya elaka ota li ka kala oproblem?
(Now when you came to Windhoek, did you not think that language would be a problem?)
- Line 15 Ndapewa: hmm ('no-no')
Nande o li kale o problem ondi na aike okuya pwaawu handi dulu

- okuudafana naye.
(Even if it is a problem, I will only go to those where we will understand each other.)
- Nande nee onda yi pomunhu ta popi Oshiingilisa iitya ondi yuudite ndele ita ndi dulu okumushunina.
(Even when I go to a person speaking English, I can hear the words, but I cannot reply.)
- Line 16 Res: Paife oho ningi nee ngaipi?
(Now what do you do?)
- Line 17 Ndapewa: Ohandi kambadhala ngoo ye ngeenge okuudite nge, ta pukulula ndje.
(I try, and when they (the person) understand me, they will correct me.)

In line 15, Ndapewa implied that she had a passive knowledge of English – she can understand utterances in English though she cannot reply. In Line 17, she revealed that she speaks a bit of English, and the interlocutor corrects her utterances if they understand. Ndapewa had never been to any urban centre before coming to Windhoek. What is common among these five participants is that they were all new in Windhoek because, by the time of the study, they had all been staying there for less than two years. This explains their limited vocabulary of other languages in their repertoire; over time and through exposure, they will have a sufficient vocabulary of other non-Oshiwambo languages.

b. Hindrance of business activities due to the inability to speak an additional language

The participants gave varied views regarding how the inability to speak several languages hinders or does not hinder their business operations. Ndapewa – a participant who sells next to her shack house – explained this in extract 5 below:

- Line 18 Res: Paife poHakahana pushiinda weni kapu na nande omuntu gwelaka limwe?
(Now in your neighbourhood, in Hakahana, there are no speakers of other languages?)
- Line 19 Ndapewa: Oku na Aadamara, naa Herero, odo ashike omihoko di liko odo mwa kwatelwa aaKavango naaDimba.
(There are Damara, and Herero, those are the only tribes, including Kavango and Dhimba speakers.)
- Line 20 Res: Paife oho popi nawo shike?
(Now which language do you use with them?)
- Line 21 Ndapewa: Aanhu ovo oviilonga Oshiwambo.
(Those people learned Oshiwambo.)

Ndapewa explains in line 21 that she had customers who are speakers of other languages but learned Oshiwambo which is not surprising because the Census 2011 indicated that the majority of the Windhoek residents are Oshiwambo L1 speakers (Namibia Statistic Agency, 2012). Most Namibian languages are Bantu language families which means they have a similar structure and/or vocabulary making it easier for the speakers of other Bantu languages to learn them. Ndapewa explained how she dealt with non-Oshiwambo customers in extract 6:

- Line 22 Res: Eecustoma doye edi iha di popi Oshiwambo oho popi nado ngeipi?
(How do you communicate with your customers who do not speak

		<i>Oshiwambo?)</i>
Line 23	Ndapewa:	Ohandi kambadhala ngoo ndi ye mwaashi ta popi (I try to go in what (language) they speak.)
Line 24	Res:	Nanditye... Ngeno tuyelegele. <i>(Let me say (pause). Let us imitate.)</i>
Line 25	Ndapewa:	Oha yuu ya po taa popi moshiingilisa. Okupula ngeno hhm, mmh mmmh. How muchi... how muchi kaaa... (thinking). <i>(They come speaking in English. To ask that (trying to recall and make a sound that means 'no-no' – annoyed with herself as she struggles to construct a sentence). How much (pause), how much kaa.)</i>
Line 26	Res:	Ka meat? <i>(A piece of meat?)</i>
Line 27	Ndapewa:	How muchi Kapana <i>(How much is barbecue?)</i> . Handi popi. <i>(I mention.)</i>

As explained in line 25, Ndapewa's business is not impacted by her language situation; in fact, she is not monolingual as she initially claimed – in the questionnaire – because she tried to speak in the language that her customers spoke to her; this explains that Ndapewa's repertoire had the vocabulary of other languages. Ndapewa seemed to have a certain ideology that one only knows a language when one speaks it with a pure structure that is free of the interference of other languages. As a result, although Ndapewa was creative with language to communicate with her customers who spoke different languages, she considered herself monolingual because she spoke English which she mixed with words and/or structures from Oshiwambo.

Martha revealed that her business is not affected because most of the time she understood the customers even though she was not able to respond. The prices of her products are depicted on the posters that are placed next to the goods. A similar strategy of displaying the prices of goods was also mentioned by Justine. Justine explained that her business is not affected by her language; to dig further, the researcher asked Justine to explain how she speaks to customers when they bargain about the prices.

Extract 7:

Line 28	Justine:	Thimbo limwe inandi shi tsakaneka naanaa omuntu ahala ku kuthilwa ko. Shaashi okapana ha handi landitha ohandi landitha owala keelanda ntano, keelanda oombali, no landa niitano uukuki. <i>(Sometimes I did not come across a customer who wants a discount because the barbecue that I sell is for five dollars and two dollars. The fat cakes are for one dollar and 50 cents.)</i>
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As explained in line 28, she never met customers who wanted discounts; this could be because the prices of her goods were affordable and there was no need for the customers to bargain about the prices. The customers looked at the displayed prices and mentioned what they want, and at the same time they normally pointed at the goods as they chose their preferred ones; there is no need for further discussion on the prices.

Ester had a different view on how her limited linguistic repertoire impacted her business. She

explained in extract 8 below:

- Line 29 Ester: Thimbo limwe omuntu ote ku thigipo eta kalanda kumukweni.
(Sometime the person will leave and go buy at other (vendors.)
- Line 30 Res: Ngele kuuviteko?
(When they do not understand?)
- Line 31 Ester: Okuuviteko, aantu yamwe kayehole okupopya Oshiwambo.
Maara olundji ihashikala oshidhigu shaashi ngele omuntu okwapopi
Yimwe mbiya, edhina lyoshinima otalikupe kutya okwaha hike.
(They understand, but some people do not like speaking Oshiwambo. But most of the time it is not difficult because although you do not understand what is said, the product name will suggest what a person wants.)

In the extract, Ester explained that she was not affected because normally when she did not understand what was said, she guess what the customer want by the name mentioned; Ester knew the names of the products – that she sells – in different languages of the customers. The act of guessing the whole meaning does not qualify her as monolingual. The only time they suffer, as explained in line thirty-one, is when the customers decided to opt for other vendors for personal reasons such as language preference but not due to language barriers.

With exception of Martha who sells her products following various construction sites, all the other vendors sell next to the shacks where they live. Anna – a vendor who sells under a tree next to her shack – explains that the prices of her products are mostly known as a result, her business does not suffer. Anna explains below in extract 9:

- Line 32: Anna: Luhapu ovanhu ove shishi nale eeprice duukuki shaashi out vahapu
poshitopolwa apa hatu landifa uukuki. Nee price detu odiifa. Keshe umwe oku
na eecustomer daye. Shaashi aanhu ove shishi kutya ondi hole uukuki waawu
naawu. Naava vehe shi vaapa Ohaveya po unene ngeenge ve ya va talele po
ava ve shi. Maara ngeenge mukweni okwa mana po ota dule okuka tala
kwaawu eshi e na sha.
(Most of the time, people already know the prices of fat cakes because many people sell fat cakes in the area. Each vendor has its customers because people can say I like the fat cakes of this one and this one. Those who are not from here normally come when they are here to visit those that they know. But in case a vendor has completed selling their cakes at the prices people want, they can refer them to other vendors in the area.)

The places where some vendors indicated that they struggled due to their limited repertoires are in the formal spaces; when they go to places such as banks to bank their earnings from their businesses and to government offices. Justine narrated one of her encounters at the bank below in extract 10.

- Line 33 Researcher: O pe na nando omaupyakadhi gamwe we ga tsakaneka
Movenduka molwa u shi owala elaka limwe? *(Are there challenges you have faced in Windhoek as a result of knowing only one language?)*
- Line 34 Justine: Yes

Line 35	Researcher:	Ngaashi? (<i>Like what?</i>)
Line 36	Justine:	Ngaashi ...naaanawa meembaanga mono, omuntu ohatu vulu kuyambo wahala ngaa okupula epulo lyontumba ndee oshili aaye. (<i>Like in the banks, one goes there willing to ask a certain question but truly no.</i>)
Line 37	Researcher:	Ndee oshili ito vulu okupopya? (<i>But truly you are not able to speak?</i>)
Line 38	Justine	Hmm mm (<i>not at all</i>).

In line 36, Justine explains that she normally has questions to ask in the bank but she cannot due to her limited repertoire; she also explains how she suffered in the hospital where she was admitted because the nurses could not speak Oshiwambo; Martha narrated – in a lengthy story – how the banker refused to help her to bank her coins because the banker was not in the mood for dealing with coins and pretended not to understand what she wanted as she could speak English. Anna had similar problems as Justine, but her encounter was at the government offices where she went for her identification documents.

c. The mechanisms employed by the woman food vendors who have a limited linguistic repertoire to keep their businesses thriving

The participants employed various mechanisms to keep their businesses thriving in the multilingual informal sector. The first strategy is that this category of vendors sells next to their homes. Four participants, Anna, Martha, Ester, and Ndapewa, sell in their neighbourhood; people know each other in the neighbourhood, and people of the same language are likely to set up their shack homes together. Also in the neighbourhood, neighbours usually form friendships. Therefore, selling in the neighbourhood minimises the possibility of meeting speakers of other languages that they may not be able to communicate with due to the vendors' limited repertoire.

All six participants know the numbers in English; in business, the price of the product is as important as the product itself because the customers see the products as displayed and ask for the price (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015); by the time the customers ask for the price, they are already attracted by the appearance of the products. When the vendor can mention the prices of their products in the official language, English – the language that is understood by most people – then most of the problem that their limited repertoire is likely to cause is prevented. There were a few vendors who made it easier for themselves, like Martha and Justine, by displaying the prices of goods next to the products. That also eliminates the need for further discussion as the customers are seeing the prices and the goods.

The participants were found selling in the community with other vendors; in this study, a group of vendors was found sitting under a tree. In the group, some vendors had a broad repertoire; some had been in Windhoek for several years while some were new in the informal sector and/or in Windhoek, and some have a limited linguistic repertoire. The vendors formed friendship relationships and friends help each other, i.e. they sell for each other when one steps out for an hour or a few minutes; even when a vendor and customer face communication barriers, those who understand usually step in to help.

When the vendors go to formal places such as a bank, government offices, and hospitals, they rely on security guards to translate, which is mentioned in the interviews with Martha, Justine, and Anna. Some vendors have children who go to school and know several languages. For example, Justine has two daughters – one at the local university and the other one at school; she took her eldest daughter with her to assist with translation on the day she opened her business account at a local bank branch.

Discussion

The findings revealed that self-assessment of a language – a method used in the initial study and used by Prah (2010) – is not a reliable method. The questionnaire that the participants were given to identify and rate their language knowledge examined four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and reading. However, the participants identified themselves as knowing only one language. This confirmed that personal language ideology affects the self-assessment of language knowledge (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015); a strong dislike of a language may influence one to claim not to know the language; a certain understanding of what constitutes knowing a language may affect the way participants assess the knowledge of their language. As observed in this study, the participants regard themselves as lacking knowledge of the English language. All participants understood English, and some use an English word in every second sentence, but they still regard themselves as not knowing the language because they did not meet the standard of ‘perfectionism’ that they believe a language speaker should possess.

The study confirms the finding of Basara (2005) that multilingualism is a vital skill in the business economy because a broad linguistic repertoire broadens the business scope while a limited linguistic repertoire narrows the scope of the business; most of these participants sell in the neighbourhood next to their homes because their mobility within the city is somehow limited by their linguistic repertoires. The participants cannot travel to other suburbs for customers because they lack the knowledge of many other languages that they may encounter should they proceed beyond their neighbourhood. Although the correct grammar of a language is vital, as found in Pennycook and Otsuji (2015), in the informal sector, vendors do not care much about correct grammar; the focus is placed on communicating and being understood. People make use of linguistic resources instead of sticking to one language to make themselves understood.

The participants reported that they were able to trade their products despite their limited repertoire. This confirms Pennycook and Otsuji’s (2015) observation that other elements attract customers, such as the quality of products, affordability, and personal relations. Language is secondary to the previous and usually speaking using linguistic resources instead of speaking in a single language eliminates language barriers (Busch, 2012).

All the participants were speakers of Oshiwambo. They seem to not feel the effect of having a broader linguistic repertoire in the market because Oshiwambo is a language that is spoken by the majority of speakers in Windhoek (Namibia Statistic Agency, 2013); probably the findings could have been different if the participants were speakers of a minority language. The participants’ repertoires comprised mostly English and Oshiwambo, their home language; this is an indication that English is as visible in the informal sector as it is in Windhoek, as reported by Stell (2014). Linguistic limitations only affect the vendors when they enter formal spaces (banks, offices, hospitals) because in formal spaces one is required to speak one language, English – the sole official language of the country.

Conclusions

The study findings provided support for metrolingualism – an approach that studies language practices in workplaces including informal workplaces like the open market. The study findings demonstrated that language is dynamic and contemporary trends such as migration, which made the informal sector more multilingual, changed how speakers use the language; the result suggested that in informal spaces like the informal sector, speakers use linguistic resources in their repertoires to communicate with interlocutors of another language. The study concluded that the participants are not monolingual because their knowledge of other languages is part of their linguistic resources; the fact that they use words and phrases of several other languages to communicate reflects the contemporary use of language in a space that has speakers of many languages.

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About the Author

Dr Indongo is a Lecturer in the Communication and Languages department at the Namibia University of Science and Technology. She was born and raised in a village in northern Namibia, which influenced her research interests. She is interested in empirical studies that aim to uplift the well-being of the most vulnerable members of society—those in villages, informal settlements, or with no university qualification. She is a teacher by profession, and part of her research is in language education. She believes Namibia will only achieve Vision 2030 if all challenges are addressed, and thus her contribution is to conduct empirical research to find solutions to societal linguistic challenges.