

Linguistic Fluidity and Identity Construction in University Students' Discourse

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Abstract

Identity and its construction form a critical influence in linguistic investigations which calls for attention. This paper, based on this call, is an evaluation of how linguistic fluidity aids hybrid language formation in the bid to construct identities. It is a product of multilingualism of people from different and even mixed backgrounds trying to foster their identity in an esteemed environment – the University. The study investigates the make-up of the group for study with regards to gender and background among other. Looking at data from interviews and questionnaire, a corpus is drawn to show that fluid communication and identity construction is a part of the processes of language shift towards a hybrid. The study is carried out within the linguistic framework of Norman Fairclough (1995) and identity construction motives of Vignoles (2011). The Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is employed to examine the discourses thereby bringing the relationship between identity construction and linguistic fluidity to the fore with the resultant hybrid. Language is here constructed as identity identifier that assigns belongingness to members of a group even when such results in language shift.

Keywords/phrases: language fluidity, students' discourse, identity, belongingness.

Introduction

Sociolinguistic and other scientific enquires have grown in the recent past looking into how individuals and even groups have constructed and maintained their identities, Bernstein (2005) and Cerulo (1997). A lot of this is in the area of discourse sociolinguistics which identifies and describes underlying mechanisms that contribute to issues in discourse in a particular context that effects communication as in the media, churches, schools, hospitals, etc. Discourse sociolinguists see language as a social practice, thus they focus on discourse practices (social norms and cultural appropriateness), the text (grammatical, semantic and sound components), the production and use (values, economics and politics of language). In other words, they try to make sense of real-life language use by looking at language environment with culture (ethnography of speaking), the principles of language (speech out theory/pragmatics), the power and politics of language. This work toes the same line

by looking at how Nigerian University students construct their own identities through linguistic fluidization as an adaptive measure through language.

Conceptual Issues

Most societies are turning multilingual and multi-ethnic, thus the youths who are mostly interactive adopt linguistic techniques that result in what is termed 'youth language' in their bid to cope with the situation. Ordinarily, language would be defined as a set of arbitrary vocal symbols and signs used by a speech community for communication. To talk of 'youth language' is to talk of a speech group with specified set of linguistic identity markers. Youth language is a kind of linguistic practice across ethnic groups, history, culture and politics providing insight into contemporary practices. Some researchers even postulate that such communities are created by individuals as a framework for meaningful personal day-to-day problem solving. Such compartmentalized groups are idiosyncratic. Maria Georgieva (2014) in an online note adds that such compartmentalization is faster and more efficient along horizontal channels (within an age range) who define existing speech codes for their needs and purpose as a distinctive way. University students' discourse rightly falls into such compartment.

Talking about university students' discourse is talking about 'youth language'. Languagehood here is merely an identity marker which can comfortably go for style or register, and not necessarily on the exactness of the definition of language for what it is. That is to say that 'youth language' is not a distinct language system. Certain characteristics are observable with such 'speech communities' which may include that members have similar perceptions and values, common conventions of communication, common settings as an institution, and often of a common age range. Youth language setting is seen here as an extra linguistic community for belonging, with language as the basic tool for the construction of the social identity of members.

Identity on its own is a set of characteristics of an individual, and his ideas on who and what the 'I' and 'self' in himself/herself is. Identity construction has to do with the 'me-ness' or 'I-ness' of an individual, and the 'us-ness' or 'we-ness' of a group. The identity constructor thus constructs and maintains such to be distinctive and efficacious so as to belong to a target group. The constructed identity is thus maintained as a lifelong act throughout life span from the cognitive, affective and communicative perspectives at most contexts.

Motives behind identity construction may be termed idiosyncratic, even when it is agreeably based on certain general worldview principles. Vignoles (2011) listed about six of such motives as: self-esteem, social identity (belonging), continuity,

distinctiveness, meaning and efficacy. These motives qualify construction as natural adaptation according to human needs, which at times are unconsciously done. Reports reveal that people who have constructed their identity to high-esteem have higher life-satisfaction and are often emotionally positive, Diener, *et al* (2003). Others who wish to get high-esteem may even take to unhealthy health behaviours like smoking and drinking to achieve their target. Two of my students are good examples of those in this category. They wished to be celebrated actors, so took to smoking and drinking in order to fit into the parts they wish to play to attain their goals. The case is the same with many others who wish to 'belong, Cerulo (1997) and Bernstein (2005). A number of other social variables like age, gender, status, etc. pep identity construction motives.

In the present world of New Communication Technology (NCTs), identity construction has significantly improved as it has paled the gaps between groups. As indispensable variables, NCTs have made people define certain social situations and made others vulnerable to realities of such situations. Altheide (1995) believes that NCTs re-organize and represent information that reshapes social activities including identity construction. Thus, they are good aids to language fluidity. Cerulo (1997:401) notes that scholars in identity studies often consider three things-linguistic communication, social practice and context and are "currently exploring the ways in which multiple identity affiliations quantitatively change the nature of human experience". Based on this, language can be seen as the tool "with which identity is constructed, enacted and projected", Cerulo (1997:401). The words of Vignoles (2011) on identity construction motives states that people are motivated by other personal and social factors to see themselves as distinguishable and competent. In other words, and in connection with communication, people tend to flow with the trends in language as influenced by their social and personal interests in relation to style and delivery to aid fluency – the ease of communication of content. This bid goes with linguistic fluidity often resulting in hybrid language formation - a mixed language drawn from several natural languages to mark a new group. Some authors refer to this as mixed language or contact language, but we wish to refer to it as 'blended language' and add that it is different from the spontaneous language mixture known as code-mixing/switching.

Theoretical Underpinning

A lot of theories on language exist, even in the area of discourse analysis, but those that pep a study is considered necessary for the strength of the study. The systematic functional linguistic approach which posits language as a system functioning in a social setting based on sound (phonology) words (morphology and syntax), and meaning (semantics) is therefore adopted here anchoring on two theories. First is the

Fairclough's theory (Critical Discourse Analysis – CDA) which is an encompassing approach to discourse analysis based on Halliday's view that language is a social act. The focus of this theory hinges on the text, practice, production, and consumption aspects of speech to expose the connections amongst discourse, social practice and structures of society. The second theory behind this work is the motives theory of Vignoles (2011) which deals with the motives behind the social act of discourse as a means of identity construction. Vignoles sums up the motives as first to satisfy belongingness needs, to satisfy human distinctive feelings, have connectivity of past and present, then make life meaningful to stimulate efficacy and competence. This is based on his view that people see themselves in the positive light and so try to influence their environment, as well as, accept their social context to achieve motivation goals.

Research Method

The design adopted for this study is descriptive. The study was carried out at Michael Okpara University of Agriculture - Umudike (MOUUAU), a higher institution in Eastern Nigeria, as a first step research for other ongoing research. The next will be in the same vein for comparisons and confirmation of facts in similar institutions in other parts Nigeria. The in-depth interview method as a loosely structured style to allow speech freedom for exploration of ideas was used to get the corpora to confirm the existence of 'a new language' and to solicit reasons for the need for shift. Demographic details are necessary here as social variables around groups under study that inform the sociomental processes of their identity constructions. Thus, the questionnaire was used to get the demographic information of the respondents, their ethnic background, and language of communication before entrance into MOUUAU, the way they speak presently, and reasons for the change. Specified demographic characteristics of the study subjects are presented in the following tables:

Table I	Variables	Frequency in Percentage
	Age: 15-20	9%
	20-25	40%
	25-30	35%
	30-35	12%
	35-40	4%
	Total = 300 respondents	100%

Table II	Gender:	
	Male	37%
	Female	63%
	Total = 300 respondents	100%

Table III Year of Study:

1 st year	17%
2 nd year	20%
3 rd year	34%
4 th year	20%
5 th year	9%
Total = 300 respondents	100%

Table IV Ethnicity:

Igbo	42%
Hausa	0%
Yoruba	12%
Efik	16%
Edo	8%
Idoma	4%
Others	18%
Total = 300 respondents	100%

Table V Most used language before university admission

English	80% (all varieties inclusive)
Igbo	4%
Hausa	0%
Yoruba	8%
Efik	5%
Others	3%

This table has given us an idea of the age range of the study subjects, their language background and ethnicity, and their most used language before university admission. The choice of the languages is based on the three national languages with the language neighbours of the language environment of the university.

Discussions and Findings

Language study in any multilingual environment reveals the use of different varieties of language as repertoires for effective communication. Language/linguistic repertoire evolve through language use in interactions, Bristowe, Oostendrop & Anthonissen (2014). They added that interaction in these repertoires involves cognitive and emotional actions in the brain as actions taken in the corporal memory that becomes habits, which are relayed as expressions of linguistic repertoire with time. Thus levels of interaction influence linguistic repertoires as people try to adapt to linguistic environment. People often identify themselves with different groups to

enhance themselves as well as to fulfill the other motives mentioned about. Moss (2016) identified two classes of such groups as abstract group that exist without much interaction, but for the definition of identity; while the other is the liberal group where members can fulfill feelings of belonging, and foster self-esteem through inter personal interactions.

The students' group of our study belongs to the liberal type. In most university environments, and particularly at MOUAAU, students' residency is scattered because official hostel accommodation for students is hardly enough within the school. As such the central and meeting point for students are the departments and even in the departments, the level groups socialize more. To socialize, students try to shift to a common language outside the classroom, which may not be a new language *per se*. such are often based on existing repertoires out of peer group pressure to belong and show arrival to a new class (having graduated from secondary schools). They create their 'language' seen as a flexible variety and regarded as a hybrid since for them it is a "step-up" from existing languages around (English and indigenous languages) to maintain their social group. Surprisingly, all new students adapt to the language environment to avoid dissing. They equally take to the new language as it suits their belongingness need. This adaptation is an identity construction strategy. Youths are generally good at adopting various strategies to construct their identity, and can go to any length to guard positive aspects of this identity. Example, in a situation where a student wants to discuss his/her results, he/she would rather say "I got 3As and 2Bs", but "that teacher gave me 2Ds". Taking credit for success and avoiding blame for failure, he/she is guarding the positive identity already constructed.

Students' language variety may not qualify as a language even when it is marked by some innovative lexicons. Mbisike (2016), in a study of LASU students' discourse reveals some processes of innovation like analogy as the formation of new complex words based on other single words. Others she also identified also include structural restriction emergence as derivational process based on existing rules of word formation, and the restructure of word-roots and their meanings. Restructures in her study are based on what obtains in Yoruba language as the dominant language of the cosmopolitan environment of the study. Interestingly, the case is not completely the same with MOUAAU where Igbo language is the dominant language of the environment and 42% of the study subjects are of Igbo ethnic group. This study observed from the corpora that the new word formations are not necessarily based on Igbo language word structure, or on the structure of Igbo word roots. But, the Igbo language sentence pattern is what they employ. Though there may be similarities in youth language, there are also obvious differences because language features are often contingent of language environment and communication acts.

As a sub-cultural group, students' groups develop language to suit their needs as language is shaped by the needs of its users. Thus, their language is a sub-language and so qualifies as slang. Based on Prasad (2014), slang is a sub-language for social identity and intimacy, often by the youth or young in spirit, marked by informality, ephemeral in nature, and belongs to a certain social group or sub-culture.

Underlying Reasons for Using 'Students' Language'

Agreeably, English language is accepted as a common language of use by our study group as revealed by their demography. Though Igbo language is the language of the environment, people still have emotional attachments to the languages they speak in their various homes. Again, most Igbo people do not speak the language of their ethnic group, even when they bear their names and their characters depict the ethnic group. It is therefore not surprising that English is the root of the 'students' language' at MOUAU - a University in Igbo speaking environment. Our interviews reveal that students' attitudes determine which language they use for the following reasons:

- their emotional allegiance leads them to use their home language at certain environments;
- their pragmatic attitudes lead them to using official language of instruction – English at certain environments like the classrooms or when they want to talk to their lecturers;
- while peer group allegiance leads them to using 'students' language/slang' at most environments.

The group motivation that leads to slang is what is of interest here as a goal oriented mental action. Reactions of the subjects of this study through the questionnaire reveal as follows:

- 70% of the study subjects believe that it is necessary "to upgrade". For them, to upgrade is to learn the students' language which means to belong to the new class of 'university students'. It is therefore prestigious for them to use the language of their "colleagues".
- 10% of them do not even know their reason for taking up 'students' language' and how they started using it. Yet, they are comfortable with it.
- 37% of them stated that had started using some lexicons of the 'students' language' before entrance into the university. They claim to have learnt such from their undergraduate relations and friends who relate with them in the language especially through the social media. Such students believe it is the language of contemporary life.
- 70% of the respondents believe it makes one accessible to others and induces friendship. In other words, they believe it creates room for social interaction.
- 90% believe that it gives one opportunity to easily communicate ideas that one may find difficult to relay in formal English. A common communication

tool is needed because of the cosmopolitan nature of the school. Thus students' language creates fluidity as the accurate movement in functionally applicable speech because it cuts across cultures, experiences, and age.

Corpus Analysis

In discourse sociolinguistics, three basic styles or methods of analyzing data are commonly used which Walls & Nelson (2001) refer to as the 3A perspective:

- Annotation which deals with the structural make-up of the corpora based on parts of speech;
- Abstraction which deals with what the research sets out to find based on language rules, and;
- Analysis deals with the statistical probing of data.

Most often the three go complementary to each other. For Mellish & Ritchie (2016), 3A perspective is a traditional way of analysis through the labeling of the parts of speech, which they see as grouping parts of the sentences of the corpora into the four main lexical categories that can be filled by individual words- nouns, adjectives, verbs and preposition. Though the 3A is the underlying tool of the analysis here, the scope of the study may not incorporate its details.

Presentation of Corpora

In the course of in-depth interviews with some of the study subjects (30 randomly selected), expressions recorded and transcribed, but only those that were not repeats from others are captured for the analysis here. The research assistants had challenges in transcribing the 'new' words, but the study subjects willingly helped in the transcription. What this suggests is that the 'new' language, that is the 'students' language already has a written form. Since the spellings from different respondents did not vary much, certain questions may arise here: Are there standard forms of students' language? Has it gone through any form of codification? If yes, by who? Though these are not in the scope of this study, they call for attention. The captured and transcribed expressions are as follows:

Guy you don chaw?	Hello, have you eaten?
Haha, they wan use me play baba ijebu.	Haha, they want to cheat me.
I don tuwama.	I am leaving.
Make I go airport.	Let me ease myself in the bush.
Girls too de borrowpose.	Girls borrow to show off.
I de rubber ruffsea.	I earn money now.
Im de notch.	He smokes.
Gi mee my capa.	Give me my phone.
You bin wan go 360 degree?	Do you have other things to do after lectures?
They bi nah fresh fine boy wey get money dem dey fin upandan.	They go about for wealthy young men.
E be like say spam de your head.	It's like you are crazy.
I wan see my sketel.	I want to see my girlfriend.
Today go fine as I wan dance skelewu with am.	Today will be fine as I will sleep with her.
We don agree to show that lecturer treasure.	We have agreed to bribe that lecturer.
I hear say the guy don over board.	I heard the boy is dead.
Wetin you still de do there, I think say you bin wan comot.	What are you still doing there, it thought you said you were leaving?
Yea, na comot I de so.	Yes, I am on my way.
You be jones man.	You are not a serious person.
My nigga, udo.com	My friend, I am fine.
You suppose comot stick for road nah.	You shouldn't block the way with your leg.
She fit lie for Africa, eeh!	She is a blatant liar.

Discussion of Corpora

Taking up real grammatical analysis of these sentences in the form of parsing the parts or through sentence diagram demands a different kind of attention that is not within the scope of this study. A descriptive survey is what is needed here for the information needed to ascertain linguistic fluidity.

First, from the corpora, even as it is observable that the lexical formations are not Igbo language based, some of the sentences do not take the Igbo sentence structure of explicitness. A most observable grammatical perspective of the corpora is that the subject/predicate structure is dominant. In sentences that begin with the verb, the subjects are assumed as in normal English language structure. Example: Gi mee my capa. 'Gi' here stands for give, as such the second person pronoun 'you' is assumed. Some exceptions exist though – 'Make I go airport'. 'Make' here is a verb and not the

main verb of the sentence, but stands for 'let'. Therefore, there is no subject assumption, but can be regarded as a hybrid uniqueness for fluency.

A holistic view of the corpora reveals that, though Igbo language is the language of the environment, and the dominant language of the study subjects, Igbo lexeme appeared only once – 'My nigga, udo.com' - as a root word. *udo* means peace, and its combination with '.com' is what is difficult to describe. Surprisingly, Yoruba expression of two words ('baba ijebu' = father from Ijebu) happens to be a phrase in the 'youth language'. In the environment of this youth language, Yoruba is hardly spoken, which makes the new language real Nigerian and versatile. This is not out of the way since the language environment is cosmopolitan, and the 'new language' belongs to a mixed language group; though one wonders why the language of the environment with up to 42% of the student from the Igbo ethnicity has not very much influenced the new language.

Grouping the corpora from MOUAU students' language into a language family, it fits well into what Faraclas (1996) and Motanya (2017) classify as Nigerian pidgin though the lexemes are uniquely peculiar to MOUAU. It is therefore here classified as a hybrid language - drawn from Nigerian pidgin, English language, and Nigerian indigenous languages for identity construction.

Social psychologists like Turner et al (1994) see depersonalization as the mother of collective identity through stereotyping, cooperation, empathy and ethnocentrism. In university environment, students try to depersonalise themselves by shifting from their linguistic base to a more central one, as a way of constructing a new identity. Most of the sentences in the corpora are others-centered, thus depicting depersonalisation for identity construction. It also depicts some psychological disposition for association and maintenance of the 'we-ness' of a group.

Conclusion

Majority of the expressions of the study subjects from Michael Okpara University of Agriculture reveal that students of the school have a unique means of communication. The corpora expose the uniqueness of the language, as well as its base on English without much influence of the language of the environment - Igbo language. Though the new language (the hybrid) is linked to Nigerian Pidgin, there is

evidence that its dynamism, uniqueness and the creativity of its users surpass that of Nigerian Pidgin. More research is needed on this language for a more appropriate tag.

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