

Language and Positive Identity Reconstruction: A Study of Nairaland and Facebook

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Abstract

Language is a source of identity. A language may help to create a community of people who belong to a particular social group. So, there is a strong correlation between language and identity. The internet and cyberspace have created new vistas of interactive fora for real-time conversations among individuals of different age brackets, who are culturally and geographically dispersed. They post and participate in written conversations, which combine speech, writing and online practices. It is also pertinent to note that age identities are also shaped by media presentations. Thus, the study examines the connection between language and identity in the Nigerian cyberspace, with emphasis on Facebook and Nairaland. The theoretical perspective employed is a hybrid of the performativity and symbolic interactionism. Purposively sampled extracts of conversations got from Nairaland and Facebook constitute the data for the study. The authors demonstrate using the theories, that people project their identities through age, gender and Nigerian pidgin. The analysis shows that identities are built in such spacial environments through social interaction and dialogical processes. It is concluded that cyber identities are fluid in representations, affirming that cyber-identity is different from physical identity, hence Interactants construct new psychosocial identities, along ethnocultural lines.

Keywords: Language, Identity Construction, Ethnocultural, Age, Cyber-space, Electronic

Introduction

Language plays an important role in shaping individual identities and differentiating how a group is different from other group. Language is used in day to day communication because it helps in improving communication between two or more parties. However, the effectiveness of communication depends on the ability of both parties to understand the language used. Failure to understand the language effectively may make individuals have the wrong understanding of the message. This is because certain words may have different meanings in different contexts. It is important for individuals discussing to take into consideration the ability of listeners to understand the information. Language has two main functions: It helps in communication and gives a group of people a sense of identity and pride. People usually identify themselves with a certain language. Various groups of people use a certain code that is only comprehensible, to people within the group. Language shows the social, gender and race of an individual. Language is a source of identity. People are different from each other and use language to portray their differences or similarities. Language may help in uniting people who belong to a particular social group. Thus, there is a close relationship between language and identity. Language is the

vehicle through which people's culture is transmitted. It is an index of identity which serves as a repository of people's culture, industry and exploits.

American linguistics Bernard Bloch and George L. submits that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate with each other in a given community. This definition sees the communicative role of language as a means of interaction. It is important to note that language is in essence a perfect means of expression among every known people. Language forms a basis for ethnic, national or international identity. Language encodes the values and norms in a given society and also gives full expression to people's values and norms.

Identity can be built through communicative action. Identity is flexible and dynamic because it can change, identity does change according to the context of who it is that they are with. Identity is dynamic in nature, it is not static whereby individual is identified with just one trait, and people take up different directions depending on their themes or means of discourse. Most time when we view people's conversations, identities can shift or change in the course of a conversation according to the different story lines. Identity can be related to racial and cultural heritage, issues of gender, age and social class.

Statement of the Problem

Our identity is what makes us different from others. Identity is consciously or unconsciously shaped by the social group on individual identities himself or herself with. Nwuche, A. et al., studied Identity construction through positioning Acts in Nigerian Vice presidential debate discourse. The study revealed that in political debates participants do not readily present their identities. They make use of some language structure that requires the analysis of the placing of self in certain positions for understanding. The theoretical framework employed in the study is Langenhove and Harre positioning theory.

Mary. P., wrote an article on Identity and Alterity in TV Autobiographical Interviews of Argentinean Popular Artist's Discursive Strategies. This research investigates ways by which discourse is utilised to recover, symbolise and sort out a stretch of experience from the past into scenes and occasions that present the self, project a personal and social identity and by contrast, establish alterity in discourse.

From the above discussions, it is evident that studies on how identities are constructed in discourse are available. Existing studies have focused on identity construction in Nigerian Vice-presidential debate discourse and identity in TV Autobiographical interviews of Argentinean popular Artist's Discursive Strategies, using Langenhove and Harre positioning theory but however, none of this scholar has used symbolic interactionism and performativity theory. Since the context of this study is different from those discussed above. However, this work attempted to highlight how Nigerians can be identified on Facebook and Nairaland through their language use and the construction of identity and also to showcase the differences in the identities people create for themselves and those created for others. This research is important because it add to existing knowledge on language and identity construction. This study is important because it provide sociolinguistics awareness to researchers and develop their understanding about their language which is an agent of their identity. The study also help educators to understand the experiences of Nigerians on Facebook and Nairaland that has to do with language and identity.

Identity construction is not about self, but also for others. This work is limited to identity of self. Our individual identity is determined by what others think of us. Identity consist of inner qualities and outer representation of self. It include individual's looks, personality. Beliefs and fears. The justification for the selection of Facebook and Nairaland is based on the availability of participants and data on the cyberspace and easy access of researcher to them.

Literature

The Concept of Identity Construction: The word identity stems from the latin word dem, which means Sameness. Identity can refer to an individual's own subjective sense of self, to personal classification 'markers' that appear as important, both to oneself and to others, and also to those markers that decline group memberships. Identity can be formed through variety of linguistic areas and variation.

Identity is our main reference point that we organize and evaluate our relationships with the world, past, future, and other people.

Language and Identity: How an individual speaks reflects their appreciation of the community's identity. The sociolinguistic research mainly addresses this issue. This aspect of language identity is the main fodder for critical literacy researchers and theorists.

Types of Identity

Cultural identity: Cultural identity is formation of ideas an individual takes based on the culture they belong to. Cultural identity relates to but is not synonymous with identity politics

Professional identity: Professional identity is the identification with a profession, exhibited by an aligning of roles, responsibilities, values, and ethical standards as accepted by the profession. It also consists of the individual's alignment of roles, responsibilities, values, and ethical standards to be consistent with practices accepted by their specific profession.⁶

Ethnic and National Identity: The word 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek ethnos. Originally meaning 'number of people living together, company, body of men. Band of comrades', later in antiquity the word came to refer to 'nation. People and in its plural form, ethne'

Gender Identity: In sociology, gender identity describes the gender with which a person identifies (i.e., whether one perceives oneself to be a man, a woman, outside of the gender binary), but can also be used to refer to the gender that other people attribute to the individual on the basis of what they know from gender role indications (social behaviour, clothing, hairstyle, etc.). Gender identity may be affected by a variety of social structures, including the person's ethnic group, employment status, religion or irreligion, and family. It can also be biological in the sense of puberty.

Language and Identity: Age

The social factors that can affect a person's language and identity include Region, Age, Gender, Occupation, Class, and Ethnicity. Teenagers may use some or all of these features to place themselves in the group identity of 'teenager.'

Age is one of the dimensions on which we construct identities for ourselves and others. Communication plays important role in influencing understandings and self-presentations with regard to age. Age identities are considerably more malleable. Gender category distinctions remain relatively impermeable over time, and the boundaries between such groups remain fairly rigid and clear for most people especially people who are transsexual/trans-gendered. In contrast, age group memberships change with time and divisions between age groups are highly negotiable. As a result, they are perhaps more open to social construction, this provides opportunity to study the communicative practices that people employ to manage their age identities. Negative age stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes are also common. Despite the fact that most of us will hope to get old, many young and old people hold negative views of older adulthood. Hence, age presents unique opportunities and points of interest for identity scholars. It is also necessary to note that age identities are also shaped by media presentations.

Teenagers' language features tend to come as standard, are constantly evolving. Adolescents will also most likely be able to recognize that older generations and children younger use language forms that are different to the ones they use. This shows an example of how language use changes across different age groups in society. Adolescents make up a key cohort when tracking language use across different ages, and there are many distinct features often present in adolescent speech that may be less frequent in other groups.

Age is a prominent aspect of an individual's identity and replace other types of identity, such as gender, religion and ethnicity. It is important to note that older individuals explore ethnic-related identity less than younger people. They do not view religious, ethnic and gender-related aspects of a person's identity to be as important as they had been.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine the role of language in constructing individual identities on Facebook and Nairaland in Nigeria. The objectives are to:

1. Identify the identities that are constructed on Facebook and Nairaland in Nigeria.
2. Examine how the identities in the selected excerpts are constructed through language.
3. Examine the linguistic markers of identity on Facebook and Nairaland.

Research Questions

1. What are the identities that are constructed on Facebook and Nairaland in Nigeria?
2. How are the identities in the selected excerpts constructed through language?
3. What are the linguistic markers of identity on Facebook and Nairaland?

Methodology

Research Design

The research design for this study is descriptive survey of qualitative approach. The broad reasons for this research design, is due to the nature of the data and mode of circulation.

Population of the Study

The population for this study consist of users of Facebook and Nairaland. People who are selected for this study are at periods when things that define their experience are centered of making and keeping friends, getting married, celebration of birthday or other sociocultural activities among other factors which continue to shape their perspectives about gender, age, social status, ethnicity among other factors that affect the subjective representation of identity.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Seven posts were randomly chosen from Facebook and Nairaland. The multi-stage sampling techniques using Facebook and Nairaland was employed for the collection of data.

Research Instruments

In the course of carry out this research work, screenshot application was the major research instrument used. Information Communication Technology (ICT) also constitutes another instrument for data sourcing and analysis. Social media communication thrives in the existence of the internet, which is also relied on to connect to the social media handles to access the data using two browser applications, Google Chrome (version 108.0) and edge (version 108.0).The data was obtained using the screenshot application, which is enabled on the windows 10 version of the computer operating system, on which the Microsoft word application is installed for analysis of the data. The analysis is superintended by two approaches/theories, put together as analytical instrument, in alignment with this section. These are stated below.

The theoretical instrument or framework is a blend of the performativity theory and symbolic interactionism. The performativity theory was used in this study to account for the representation of social actions. Symbolic interactionism is tied to the conversations. The theory accounts for meaning as part of social interaction. The implication of blending these theories in this study is to align with the view that social identity is a construct of both social actions and interactions, and social media communication is dominated by both factors. They are the tools or variables of language in the social media community.

Results and Discussion of Findings

For the purpose of reiteration, the analytical method is designed to ensure the realisation of the three objectives set for this study, which include, to identify the identities that are constructed on Facebook and Nairaland in Nigeria, to examine how the identities in the selected excerpts are constructed through language, examine the linguistic markers of identity on Facebook and Nairaland.

Presentation of Research Objectives

Research Objective One: Identify the identities that are constructed on Facebook and

Nairaland. The identities that were constructed on Facebook and Nairaland discourses in Nigeria are age, gender, national, ethnicity or religion.

Interactants in social media discourse account for condescension as a factor of age. The changes inevitable to people constitute part of their conversations on the platforms and

indicate how they respond to the changes around them. The condescension is necessitated or attributed to age.

Excerpt 1

But kindly indulge me for a bit, I do design's of military defense items, a touch of chaos an environment of work, for me stability is something I cherish, hence why I like lady's within my **age** range, I'm 30 so a lady of 32 who's reasonable will do, I believe during the course of the relationship we will outline our fantasies and explorations, **if love relationship means anything is putting the other person's interest**

Plate 1: Nairaland post 001

In the excerpt above, age is portrayed the condescender at three levels. First, the speaker identifies 'chaos' and 'work' as bidirectional factors that are attributed to the age and trajectory of humans that elicit the performative act of condescension, which is portrayed by the verb 'cherish'. This act is used to balance the feeling of chaos and work, which are naturally inconvenient for people to cope with. Balance, which is what 'stability' signifies is used as a synonym for condescension. At the second level, the trajectories of human relationship, especially love, is represented as a matter of condescension because the two parties that come into the relationship have performative acts associated with different 'fantasies' and 'explorations.' Hence, there is need for condescension for both parties. Discrepancies in terms of age is another condition for condescension in matters of relationship. The performative verb, 'like', shows preference, while there is inference in the structural process, 'age range', indicating that the speaker is indeed thirty years of old.

Gender specificity is also represented in the repetition of 'lady', indicating that the speaker is a male. In most cases, in love and marital relationships, males are often older than women. However, in this case, the man is willing to condescend to having a relationship with a 'lady' who is two years older than he is. The latter part of the excerpt presents another instance of condescension. The performative acts, 'means' and 'putting' are used to signify the extent to which sacrifice is needed for mutual existence or satisfaction. Sacrifice here, which is represented by 'interest', implies condescending to doing what will please each other.

Excerpt 2

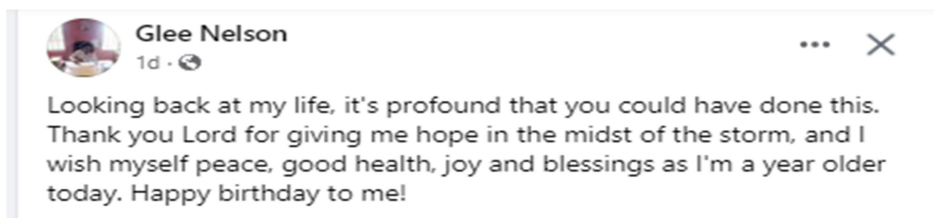


Plate 2: Facebook post 002

The above excerpt is an example of religious identity in which is Christianity marked by the statement 'Thank you Lord'.The excerpt above portrays condescension as a reminiscence, using performing acts that indicate recollection and introspection of times. Two times are

indicative, namely the past and the present. The past is brought to the discourse by the performative of recollection, 'looking back.' This establishes the inference that the past time is significant in the trajectory of the speaker. But the clue of the past 'life' is signified in the following sentence. The prepositional phrase, 'in the midst of the storm' indicates that the speaker has had an unpleasant situation that required condescension. the identity of condescender is structured in the compound sentence, using parallel nouns, 'hope', 'peace', 'health', 'joy' and 'blessings', while the performative act signifying condescension is 'wish', which is indexed to 'hope.' The implication of this is to posit that hoping and wishing are condescending and coping strategies when things are not what one expects as one grows older.

Research Objective Two: Examine how the identities in the selected excerpts are constructed through language.

Language is used to construct identity through the use of names, choice of words, subject of their discussions, collocational acts, Nigerian pidgin and codes. There is also the use of capitalisation to foreground markers of identity.

Excerpt 3

If na by resemble you know how many unknown brothers and sisters you go potentially get out there?

A man of 27years no suppose dey still pursue child support upandan na. If him don survive without him dad till 27yrs of **age** then him obviously no need the dad, if the dad no want am. He should sort himself out and face him front, not be chasing unverified papa wey no send am.

Plate 3: Nairaland post 002

Trans: *A 27year old man is not supposed to be on child support again, since he had survived that long without a father. If his father does not want him, then he should take care of himself, move on, and stop chasing a father who does not care about him.*

The excerpt above considers age as an indispensable condition for condescension, treating it as a performative concessional act. It is important to mention that social media are platforms for informal communication and different codes. In this case, the speaker has used the local Warri pidgin, marked with the slang, *wey no send am*, which implies unconcern, and marks the reason for condescension. The excerpt posits that age is premediated by growth, which must be progressive. For instance, a 27year old has grown from childhood to adulthood; thus, must not behave like a child. The speaker also ties condescension to survival, using the standard performative, 'survive'. Survival itself is also a coping strategy that is connected to growing up. The speaker also used standard structures to mark survival and condescension. Among these are , 'obviously', the performative, and 'sort out'. There are also non-standard or piginised structures marking condescension, in this case, moving on. These include the performatives, 'face front', and 'no send'. There is a structural balance in the text, created by the use of standard and piginised pronouns, 'him', and 'am', respectively.

Excerpt 4

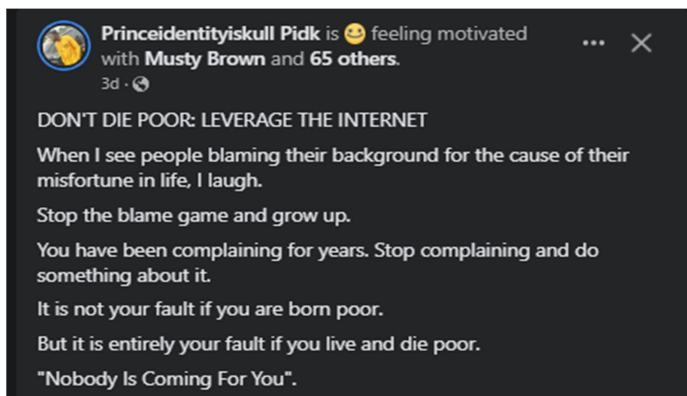


Plate 4: Facebook Post 003

The excerpt above interrogates age as a factor in human transition from one stage to the other. There are two structural levels of condescension projected by the speaker. These are the level of staying and the second level is moving on. Those who condescend to stay are what the speaker refers to as engaging in the performative act of 'blaming' and 'complaining'. The speaker collocates condescension to 'misfortune', which he terms as a performative consequence. Age is indexed to 'years', and the performative act, 'grow.' On the other hand, the act of moving on is performatively expressed, using 'stop', 'grow' and 'do'. There is structural parallelism in the acts of living and dying, treating them as sequential acts of condescension. The condescender identity here is interfaced with a demeaning status that is being 'poor'. The speaker's structural approach in the excerpt is between instruction and evangelicalism; that is, trying to get one from being complacent (the first level of condescension) to a state of activity, moving to change the situation (the second level of condescension).

Research Objectives Three: Examine the linguistics markers of identity on Niaraland.

The linguistic makers are the linguistic choice. These are performative verbs and modal performative acts.

Certainly, age is a factor or condition that accelerates and not diminish. In the same way, normatively, it is expected to contribute to one's development in life. Those that progress as a result of their progress in age are represented with the identity of 'progressor'. Many indices are used to index the progressor identity in Nairaland posts and comments, such as success in endeavours, advancement, and change of status, among others that are represented in the data.

Excerpt 5

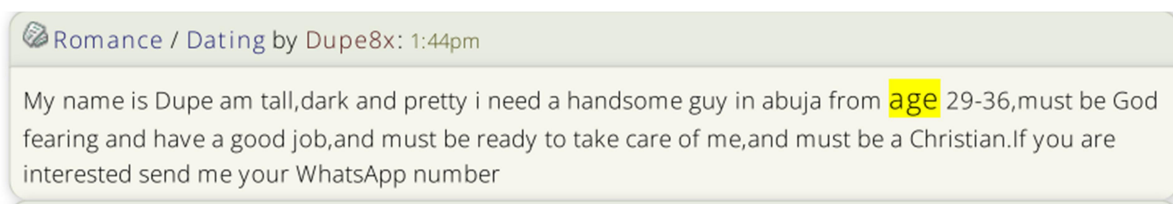


Plate 5: Nairaland post 003

In the excerpt above, the speaker ties progress in life to some other factors that are underlined by age and growth. First, the age range of progression or advancement is identified using numeric adjective '29-36'. The submission is relevant to the fact that this is the age of commencement of stability in one's growth, in the structural hierarchy. The speaker uses epistemic modality as existential performative; the verb 'must be' which should be an epistemic modality of certainty, has been used to define responsibility. In other words, anyone within this age group, is expected to progress in the respective areas as a matter of responsibility. The performative of having and being is indexed to possession and attitude as markers of the progressor identity. The structure has parallelism in the post; the process of getting a job sequence to the ability to 'take care' of the speaker. She considers this to be conditions for readiness to start a relationship, while the latter, which is related to religiosity, is held with the performative of certainty.

Conclusion

Language is very central to identity. It is a means of constructing identity. It is used as a tool for uniting people, for marking their distinctiveness and as a means of asserting people's uniqueness from other people or groups. There are two areas that this study contributes to existing knowledge, namely, the theoretical and analytical framework and the levels of identity representations. This study has contributed to the dynamics of performative acts, with representational conditions that made it applicable to the formation or analysis of identity.

This section foregrounds the conclusions that can be adduced to this study. These conclusions also serve as evaluation of the main findings along with the objectives of the study, with respect to the representation of identity, it can be concluded that Facebook and Nairaland users both consciously, unconsciously, implicitly and explicitly portray their identity as part of their communication.

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