

The Connection between Language and Identity: the Yoruba-Arab Literates and The Street Urchins of Ibadan

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Abstract

The current paper is dedicated to investigate the connection between language and identity, with a special reference to two ambivalent social groups in Ibadan, i.e., the Yoruba-Arab literates and the street urchins. The research shall be carried out with samples of online videos as well as other online resources. One major phenomenon that connects people with varying degrees of social status, religious, ages etc. is the language they speak. In every society, language plays a herculean task in reflecting the identity of the people, and in most times, its usage shows the social class of the speaker. It is incontrovertible that, language and identity go together. We identify people and affiliate them with certain tribe, race or ethnic as the result of language they speak. In other words, we may say, there is no identity without language, this is because the language we speak gives people the opportunity to link us with certain community.

Keywords: language; identity; Yoruba-Arab literates; Ibadan-street urchins.

A. Introduction

The language being spoken by a certain group of people constructs their identity and it is the phenomenon that links people of different social classes, ages, religions, etc. together under a single denomination. The concept of identity helps to detect where individuals or groups of people belong to. Not only that, it is also mutually constructed, and reveals the image of 'self and other'. As it

is generally perceived, the issue of identity also manifests in how speakers go about staging their sense of belonging while speaking. In essence, people's identity is the concept of 'who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others, (Hogg, M. & Abrams, D., 1988:2). In furtherance, identity is like a process of self-presentation which could be connected to how individuals want to be known. It is just like what Mahmoud Darwish refers to as 'self-defence' and the child of birth, but at the end, it is self-invention, and not an inheritance of the past'(Camelia 2011, 49). This pinpoints the fact that in order to create an identity for the self, there is a need for rebirth and redefinition of the self.

Identity as a subcategory of representation – except that it extends beyond the bounds of representation as traditionally conceived. It is thus, according to Joseph, E.J, the category in which a person, an individual, animal or object is read as belonging (Joseph 2004, 40). More than that, "Identity is the human capacity—rooted in language—to know "who's who" and hence "what's what" (Jenkins 2008, 5). It involves who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are and so on, and this spells out the fact that identity represents our real self.

It is therefore true to say that understanding of language can never be complete without putting 'identity' into consideration. Arguably, the language of a particular people unveils, without any doubt, their ethnic, cultural affinities, as well as their other features. And that is why "Members of cultural groups perform their culture by creating 'texts' of various sorts– the process of entextualisation", as Coupland puts it (Coupland 2007, 107).

The concept of 'identity' remains an inseparable entity from language for it is the medium through which the 'real self' operates and manifests. Language is the vessel that accommodates identity because everyone uses accent, dialects, and language variations that reveal their actual affinity to a certain social, ethnic, national, and even religious group. It is not uncommon that the issue of identity also arises from the practice of designating people and cultures in relation to their language, a phenomenon which Owoyemi observes as venerable and widespread (Owomoyela 1992, 85). In furtherance,

he cites an example of how the identity of the Yoruba people is attached to the Yoruba phrase ‘*ka’aaro*’ meaning ‘good morning’. Because of the widespread use of this phrase in Yorubaland, the name ‘*Ile Ka’aaro o jiire*’ is designated for the land (Owomoyela 1992, 23). To show the strong connection between language and identity, Ugochukwu laments over the current decline of the Igbo language among the British-Nigerians in the UK where he says: ‘Igbo language is our identity. When we lose it, we lose our identity...’ (Ugochukwu 2021, 6).

Therefore, in order to examine this phenomenon, this paper attempts to study the language use of two ambivalent social groups in Ibadanland— the Yoruba-Arabic literates, and the street urchins. The study shall be carried out on selected online videos and other internet material. In all, the study shall focus on the language use of the two groups and how it reveals their identity. Thus, the study deems it fit to raise these questions viz. Of what linguistic and social categories do the two groups belong? How does their language use reveal their identity? And how is their social affinity reflected in their language? Hence, we delve into this inquiry through these trajectories.

B. The Two Social Groups

To start with, our social environments consist of various groups of a different race, age, ethnic, culture, religion, language, and ideology in which members of each group have their distinct means of identity. This identity is revealed via many ways, such as language, religion, or physical appearance, etc. In Nigeria, for example, there are heterogeneous social affinities ranging from religion, language, culture among others. In Nigeria, Arabic, an erstwhile official language of the Northern part of Nigeria during the Sokoto Caliphate prior to the colonial rule, still attracts several people from different walks of life striving to master and cultivate it as a foreign language. The Nigerian pre-colonial scholars were said to have used the Arabic scripts otherwise known as *Ajami* system in writing their indigenous languages (Abdurrahman 2019, 166). Despite the threat faced by the Arabic language in Nigeria with the

imposition of English as the official language of the country by the British colonial masters, the Arabic language still finds its way to be studied by many people particularly the Muslims. In the Yorubaland, there are many modern Arabic schools where students graduate to become not only speakers of the language but also well-grounded in its grammar. In Ibadanland, a number of these graduates proceed in their thirst for Arabic studies to pursue higher degrees in tertiary institutions at both local and international levels. As a result, they become bilingual or multilingual through the process of acquiring the Arabic language in addition to their mother tongue and any other local languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Fulfulde, or Igbo or English. This however corroborates what Fadoro observes as one of the factors of bilingualism i.e. education (Fadoro 2008, 19). Hence the acquisition of Arabic language by the Yoruba-Arabic literates through education. This social class is what we refer here to as the Yoruba-Arabic literates who often become teachers, preachers, *qāḍīs*, lecturers of higher institutions amongst others in their various communities.

On the other hand, the phrase ‘street urchins’ is defined by the Cambridge Online Dictionary (December 5, 2019) as the children who are poor and do not have home living and sleeping on the streets of a city. Because of their lack of parental care and training, this group of children often get involved in many criminal offenses such as pilfering, stealing, drug abuse and the like as they grow older. Also known as ‘Area boys’ (or as *Agberos*, *omo ghetto*, *omo ita*, ‘*yan banga*, etc.). In Nigeria, they are loosely organized gangs of street children and teenagers, composed mostly of males, who roam the streets. They, at times, extort money from passers-by, public transporters and traders, sell illegal drugs, act as informal security guards, and perform other ‘odd jobs’ in return for compensation (Wikipedia 2021). Also, they are known for violence and constituting a nuisance in the community they live in. It is known that, however, especially, the adult among them, participate in many criminal acts like thuggery, robbery, and violation of rule and order.

These two opposite social groups of Ibadan have their distinct way of using language that defines their identity. The Yoruba-Arabic literates are known for insertion of Arab words and phrases and expressions while speaking their mother tongue. This, undoubtedly, forms an easy and quite effective manner of foregrounding their identity as Arabists or Nigerian users of Arabic language. In a similar vein, the Area boys, otherwise known as the street urchins or *omo ita*, etc., are known for their word coinage and expressions which often find their origin from the language use of popular Nigerian hip hop singers, comedians, or any other public entertainers.

C. The Yoruba-Arabic Literates and their *Languaging*

As stated earlier, this group are usually well-grounded in the use of the Arabic language. As such, they could be considered as bilingual or multilingual individuals since they have acquired another language in addition to their mother tongue. Hence, they tend to fall into two linguistic phenomena viz. code-mixing and code-switching. It is equally possible to say that the process of ‘polylingual *languaging*’ manifests in the language use of the Yoruba-Arabic literates of Ibadanland. This process, as used by Jørgensen. He (Jørgensen 2008, 175) implies a situation whereby a speaker’s multilingual identities unfold in the course of speaking. Also, Hudson defines code-switching as a case where ‘a fluent bilingual talks to another fluent bilingual changes language without any change at all in the situation’ (Hudson 1996, 63). In another words, it is described as the alternative usage of two or more languages within a conversation (Fadoro 2008, 35).

Code mixing, on the other hand, is a situation whereby a speaker alternately uses two or more languages within a single sentence (Fadoro 2008, 34). So, it is observed that ‘selfing and othering’ happen through the use of code-switching and code-mixing by the Yoruba-Arabic literates of Ibadanland. They tend to use these sociolinguistic tools to display their linguistic proficiency in the languages, to impress their audience, or to exclude an intruder from their private talks all of which, in long run, play a significant role in revealing their identity as Arabic literates. The table below contains

some instances of code-mixing among selected Yoruba-Arabic literates of Ibadanland (Online videos of Amubieya, S. & Alade, S.: 2019):

Sentence	English Meaning
<i>Walad, loo bami mu qalam yen wa</i>	Hey boy, bring that pen for me
<i>‘...cri akoko ni qiṣṣah iyawa Asmā’</i>	...the first proof is the story of our mother, Asmaa’
<i>‘...a o gba awon malaika gbo ijmālan’</i>	‘...we should believe in the angels in general’
<i>‘...awon malaika yi asnāf ni won’</i>	‘...the angels are of many types’
<i>E ma binu simi, awon mishwār kan ni moun yanju</i>	Please do not be angry with me, I was busy with some issues

In the first example, the use of two Arabic words within the same sentences is observed. The first word, *walad* (a boy), and the second, *Qalam* (a pen), are both used to code mix by a Yoruba-Arabic literate speaker. This expression is usually made by teachers at Ibadan modern Arabic schools when commanding their students to do something. The words ‘*qiṣṣah*’, ‘*ijmālan*’, and ‘*asnāf*’ are all Arabic word used in Yoruba sentences by some Yoruba-Arab literates. However, the word ‘*mishwār*’ in the last statement is an Egyptian Arabic word often used by a friend, who is a graduate of Al-Azhar University in Cairo. He usually utters the statement to apologize for missing calls.

As for code-switching, we shall examine the following examples (Online videos of Adekunle, H.B. & Amubieya, S.: 2019):

Statement	Meaning
<i>‘...ati soro nipa wipe igbagbo ninu Olohun: al-Īmānu billāhi wa malā’ikatihi. Awon won yi ni akoko origun igbagbagbo ninu Islam’</i>	‘...we have discussed the topic of belief in Allah, belief in Allah and His angels. These are the first pillars of faith in Islam’
<i>‘...Baba so fun wa wipe: yanqasimu ṭaṭawwu’ ilā ṭaṭawwu’ muṭlaq wa ṭaṭawwu’ muqayyad’</i>	‘...Our Sheikh tells us that: the supererogatory deeds are classified into general and specific’
<i>‘... akoko ohun ti obirin gbodo se fun oko re ni wipe, tamkīnuhā</i>	‘...the first responsibility of a woman towards her husband is to humble and enable herself to him...’

<i>nafsahā lizawjihā...'</i>	
'...eni ti o ko masalasi, kiniī esan re? se yo wo al-jannah, se koni wo, kini o nīje ki o wo? bi'awnin minar-Raḥman nufassiru hādhīhī al-Umūr bidīqqah'	'...the one who builds a mosque, what would be his reward? Is he entitled to al-Jannah, is he not entitled to it? what would debar him of entering it? by the grace of Allah, we shall shed light on these issues'

In the above-stated examples, the speakers code-switch from their mother tongue to the Arabic language either consciously or unconsciously. At times, they do so to show their proficiency in the latter while it becomes an involuntary action in other instances. However, the use of language in the above manner does not only reveal that the speakers have some Arabic backgrounds and but also construct an identity for them. Hence, their dual belongings become clear; the first being a native speaker of Yoruba language while the second is proficiency in the Arabic language. It is important to note that some of the Yoruba-Arabic literates are too excessive in their code-mixing and code-switching between the two languages to the extent that it becomes difficult for a layman or a non-Arabic proficient or even someone with little knowledge of Arabic to understand their speech.

On the other hand, street urchins also known as *omo ita* or Area boys, are known for their use of vulgar languages or what could be described as 'dirty street languages'. Their slangs mostly spring up from music, local movies, but more of the former than the latter. These slangs, however, are widely spread among some of the youths such as the *okada* riders, *danfō* drivers, street boys, etc. and they are often considered to be vulgar and dirty languages which are not expected from a cultured individual. The language use of the *omo itas* symbolizes not being morally upright and being a 'bad boy'; its users create an identity for themselves whenever they talk in that manner. It has become a norm for the Ibadanland elders, guardians, or parents to caution their wards against the usage of those slangs. An elder could be heard scolding his ward saying: '*Mo ti man kilo fun e wipe ki o ma maa soro bi omo ita maa*', meaning 'I have been warning you against speaking like the '*omo ita*'.

In furtherance, it is observed that the street boys usually engage in what is termed, in linguistics, as a ‘semantic extension’ of either Yoruba or English words. Langacker defines this linguistic phenomenon as ‘a way of obtaining a new term by extending the use of old one’ (Langacker 1973, 186). In essence, the *omo itas* use words from Yoruba, English, or Pidgin, to connote meanings that are different from the original ones to reveal their social identity. Below are some examples¹ of semantic extension as popularly used as a phrase by the so-called *omo itas*:

Sentence/Phrase	Original Meaning	Extended Meaning
<i>Gbe bodi e</i>	Lift your body	Be quick or take your leave
<i>Ebora to le posta sori ofurufu</i>	The demon that pasted his poster on the sky	This is a way of eulogizing an unapologetic <i>omo ita</i> as someone who is influential and has control over others
<i>Gbe se</i>	Lift your leg	It is said to charge someone to work, but in most cases, to dance
<i>Ji masun</i>	Wake up; do not sleep	Be active or strive for your success
<i>O shaprapra</i>	It is very sharp	It is very interesting and exciting

In the above table, the illustrated sentences consist of both Yoruba and English words that were used with new connotations. It is, therefore, true to say that the language of the *omo itas* is based on code-mixing of both Yoruba and English words. It is also worthy of note that the several English words in the above examples include body, poster, and *shaprapra* which is a bastardized version of the word ‘sharp’, while others find their ways from the Yoruba language.

D. Conclusion

In the foregoing, an attempt has been made to showcase the strong nexus between language and identity by delving into some socio-linguistic concepts. In furtherance, the study tries to situate the link between the two concepts on the two selected social groups of

¹ The examples contained in the table were fetched through a chat with selected members of the said social group as well as a personal encounter with some of them.

Ibadanland viz. Yoruba-Arabic literates and the street urchins (*omo ita*) thereby investigating how their language use unfold their identity. As such, various illustrations were drawn from samples of online materials of the two social group. A brief analysis of the samples was also carried out to showcase how their language use becomes a key player in revealing their identity. It became clear through the illustrations that the Yoruba-Arabic literates engage their *languaging* techniques via code-mixing and code-switching. In contrast, the Ibadan street urchins are known with what is mostly referred to as semantic extension in their utterances.

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