

Diglossia, Social Identity Construct and Political Strategy in Nigeria**Rosemary Ebele Chiedu (PhD)**

Department of Languages,
School of General Studies
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku,
Delta State, Nigeria
rosemarychiedu@gmail.com
08034058767

Abstract

Diglossia is a linguistic situation, whereby more than one language co-exists in a speech community, such as Nigeria. This situation means that Nigerian politicians need to be able to interact with the masses despite the linguistic plurality of the country. In addition, they need to construct social identities that align with the cultural differences in the country. The aim of this study, therefore, was to discover how diglossia provided Nigerian politicians with the political tool to construct acceptable social identities. Data were collected from the presidential campaign speeches delivered by the current Nigerian president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu at the presidential campaign rallies in South-East Nigeria, where Igbo language is the predominant indigenous language used by the inhabitants. Five speeches presented at the rallies in Imo, Enugu, Anambra, Abia, and Ebonyi states were collected from the YouTube channels of Nigerian mainstream media organisations. The speeches were transcribed into texts and qualitatively analysed through the lens of Tajefel and Turner's Social Identity Theory. Findings revealed that the president assumed social identities that shifted from his original identities based on his ethnicity, culture, religion, age, and social class. He constructed these identities with Igbo, Nigerian Pidgin, and Christian collocations presented in English. The study concluded that diglossia provided Nigerian politicians with the linguistic tool for constructing social identities that enhance their political strategies.

Keywords: *Diglossia, Social Identity, Social Identity Theory, Presidential Campaign, Nigerian Pidgin*

Introduction

Diglossia is a linguistic situation that exists in multilingual communities. Al-Brri et al. argue that it refers to a situation, whereby more than one language or language varieties exist and compete in a community (16). Here, they identify the existence of dialects, slang, jargon, and other varieties of a specific language as diglossia. However, Alsahafi discloses that diglossia is found in situations, where a more complex language or language variety that is considered more prestigious is superimposed on a community with its own language or dialect (1). This is why there are high and low language varieties in diglossic communities. Here, the high variety, which is considered more prestigious and classy, is used in formal settings while the low variety is reserved for informal conversations.

The descriptions of diglossia, as given by Al-Brri et al and Alsahafi, point towards the Nigerian language situation, where more than 500 indigenous languages co-exist. In addition to the indigenous languages, the country is a host to the English language and Nigerian Pidgin. These two additional languages have permeated into the country so that they are spoken across its boundaries and the six geopolitical zones. English is currently Nigerian lingua franca, the country's major official language, the preferred language of the upper class and elites, a sign of good education, and the language that enables Nigerians to interact effectively with the international community. On the other hand, Nigerian Pidgin is the favourable language for informal interactions, especially among youths, members of the armed forces, undergraduates, traders, and people from different social classes (Ukpe 4; Koutchade 22). This is to say that in every Nigerian speech community, there is a co-existence at least one indigenous language, English, Nigerian Pidgin and varieties of these languages.

One of the areas that may prove challenging as a result of the country's diglossic situation is Nigerian political discourse. This is because Nigerian politicians, especially those operating at the federal level, need to break through the barriers of language to interact with the masses to win their votes and supports. This is made more important by the fact that people accept and support those they perceive as members of their social groups (Karla and Danis 3). Put differently, the social identity a politician portrays will determine whether he will be accepted or rejected by his target audience. This means that Nigerian top politicians, especially the presidents, must have discovered ways to create social identities that align with every Nigerian, irrespective of tribal, age, religious, cultural, social class, and linguistic differences.

The aim of this study is to discover how diglossia provided Nigerian politicians with the political tool to construct acceptable social identities. Specifically, the study examined how language is used by the current president of Nigeria to construct different social identities while interacting with the masses. As a result, the objectives of the study were to identify the language and language varieties he uses and the kind of social identities he constructed while addressing Nigerians. That way, the study was able to establish the relationship shared by diglossia, social identity construct, and Nigerian political strategy.

Social Identity

Kumar and Prakash disclose that identity can be described differently by different scholars as a result of the disparity in the perception of the concept by their fields (1). However, from the perspective of sociology, which is the scientific study of human social behaviours, institutions and relationships, identity refers to the social categories people locate themselves with as well as the relational roles they perform within their social environment. Anchoring on this perspective, Kumar and Prakash describe social identity as the form of identity that characterises individuals as members of different social groups (1). Here, they identified social categories as race, religion, gender, educational level, nation, caste, social class, ethnicity, and community (Kumar and Prakash 1). In other words, an individual's social identity, from the perspective of Kumar and Prakash, refers to how he or she is distinguishable from other people as a result of his/her social group membership.

According to Gervasio and Karuri, a person's social identity is the totality of who the individual is (43). This includes the individual's ethnicity, age, educational level, positions, roles, reputations, relationships, and culture. They explain that it also involves where the person grew up, how he perceives the world, and any qualities he possesses, which can define how he relates with others in society. Ahsan et al. disclose that social identity refers to how people define themselves and others at different social settings (163). But they also reveal that people's social identity changes because they (people) transform as they interact with others. In addition, Ahsan et al. observe that people tend to switch their social identities in different social settings and circumstances to fit into the cultural and social expectations of the group (166). This is why an individual's social identity can only be classified or categorised according to the social context it was displayed.

Walton discloses that social identity is not only concerned with the social group an individual wishes to be identified with but also with the emotional attachment he or she has towards the group and the sense of belongings shared by the members of the group (2). He further describes a social group as a community of people, who identify, describe and define themselves in a particular way as well as share in a common experience, ideology, and belief system (Walton 3). Based on this perception, it means that what constitutes a social group is limitless because people can be bonded by different forms of physical, ideological, social, cultural, and religious factors. In other words, an individual may acquire limitless social identities depending on social context, roles and expectations of circumstances.

This study adopts Ahsan et al. definition of social identity as its working definition of the concept. This is because its goal is to identify how Nigerian politicians, specifically the current president of the country, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, define themselves at different social settings in order to interact with their audience and become acceptable. With this definition, the study is able to identify how diglossia provided the political strategy used by the politician to create social identities that align with his audience at different social settings.

Language and Social Identity Construct

Kumar and Prakash observe that the relationship between language and social identity can be connected to the relationship between language and culture (2). They maintain that people use language to show their linguistic allegiance as well as common social history, shared values and narratives, and collective memories. Kumar and Prakash also explain that people use language to state their experiences, which can disclose the groups they belong to (2). Pable et al. explain that social identities are not static or rigidly fixed because a shift or switch in language can consequently lead to a shift or switch in social identity. Put differently, when an individual changes the language or language variety he uses in social interactions, his social identity also switches to align with the selected language (672). In other words, when different languages are used to express the same experience, social identities are created. This perception shows that experience alone is not enough to describe social identity because it has to work in tandem with language to achieve such a goal.

Pable et al. further disclose that language and social identity are closely related because people's linguistic behaviours align with the values of their social groups (673). This, they explain, is because an individual's age, gender, childhood background and experience, and social status reflect in their linguistic behaviour. Kalra and Danis agree with the observation of Pable et al. because they maintain that the language an individual uses helps members of his social group to identify him (3). They state that this is because there tends to be positive bias and favouritism existing among group members. As a result, people adopt languages and language varieties that will align them with the groups they wish to identify with in order to secure in-group favouritism.

While describing how language helps in social identity construction, Ahsan et al. reveal that linguistic features, such as dialect, accent, code-switching, and style, are capable of constructing people's social identity because they can relay the culture, ethnicity, linguistic

knowledge, and social class of speakers (166). Alexander and McCargo disclose that in diglossic communities, people tend to choose different varieties of language in different contexts depending on the social identity they wish to construct at that point in time (82). They observe that while some language varieties are reserved for interactions with close relatives, associates and friends, others are used in formal occasions and for interactions with unfamiliar persons and distant relations. Alexander and McCargo also observe that certain language varieties are chosen to show solidarity while others are used to create distance and detachment (80).

Alshehri maintains that the relationship between language and social identity revolves around sameness and differences (156). He explains that individuals that speak the same language are socially identified as belonging to the same group while those that speak different languages are rarely associated as members of a group. This observation describes the case of in-group and out-group membership, where the former comprises people that use the same language or language variety and the latter as people that use language variety that is different from that of in-group members. Alshehri explains that the sameness in the language of in-groups arises from the constant interaction between members while the difference in the language of different social groups is because different social groups have less contact and interactions (158).

Tajuddin and Zulkepli also explain that the interactions between in-group members help them to build a bond among themselves, which tends to unite them (4). However, for such to occur, they have to interact in approved language. As Ashokkumar and Pennebaker disclose, for an individual to connect and become accepted by the members of a social group, he needs to speak the language or language variety they identify with and approve (2).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Henri Tajfel and John Turner Social Identity Theory. Tajfel and Turner developed this theory to identify how social groups influence members' perception of self and behaviours, including linguistic behaviours (Mutua et al. 2). They disclose that people show bias towards others according to the perceived social group they belonged. Here, Tajfel and Turner observe that people tried to be more positively biased towards their in-group members than to

members of the out-group. In addition, they observe that there are similarities in the behaviours of in-group members, which they use to differentiate themselves from the out-group members, whose

behaviours are dissimilar to theirs. This discovery propelled Tajfel and Turner to develop the Social Identity Theory framework, which can be used to study and identify people's social identities through the social groups they align with.

Social Identity Theory postulates that people pass through three stages of development while choosing social identities. The first state is the group categorisation stage, where people identify the differences in the behaviours of different social groups. The second stage is the social identification stage, where they decide which social group to align with and then begin to modify their behaviours to align with or blend properly with the group. This is the also the stage, where they are accepted by the social group of interest as a result of their behaviour modifications. The third and final stage is the bias stage. This is where people compare in-group and out-groups and begin to show positive or negative biases, respectively. It is at this stage that the people begin to show favouritism to in-group members and disdain to out-group members.

Karla and Danis, however, explain that Social Identity Theory also postulates that people can decide to identify with different social groups of interest at different contexts and intervals (2). This behaviour and decision take place at the second stage of social identity development because it is concerned with selection of which group to align with and the modification of behaviours to align with the group. This study, therefore, anchored its data analysis on this very principle of the theory because it captures the strategies used by people to align with social groups of interest. In other words, it provided the theoretical lens for examining how the current Nigerian president used diglossia as a political strategy to align with different social groups during his presidential campaigns.

Methodology

The data for this study were selected from the campaign speeches made by the current president of Nigeria, Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The choice of these speeches were motivated by the fact that the speaker needed to campaign across the country, including in states that do not share his native language, which is Yoruba. In addition, he also needs to be able to connect with his listeners and present himself as a member of their social group before he becomes acceptable. Hence, his campaign speeches provided rich data for identifying he utilised the diglossic situation in Nigeria to his advantage. Based on this, the purposive sampling method was used to select five campaign speeches, which he delivered at the presidential campaign rallies in South-East Nigeria

(Imo, Enugu, Anambra, Abia, and Ebonyi states), where Igbo language is the predominant native language of the audience. Considering that the researcher understands the Igbo language, it was easier to identify any linguistic modifications made in the speeches and the meanings of such modifications.

The campaign speeches were sourced on YouTube and downloaded from the channels of Nigerian mainstream media organisations – TVC News and Channels TV. The choice of obtaining data from YouTube and the mainstream media were motivated by the need to collect the speeches from authentic sources as well as to ensure that the whole speeches were assessed without any form of manipulations. The audios of these speeches were manually transcribed before being subjected to analysis.

The collected data were analysed qualitatively to provide an opportunity for categorisation and description of identified linguistic modifications made by the president. Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory provided the theoretical lens for identifying and describing these modifications and the reasons they were made. The study utilised the theory's tenet of social identification as the perspective for analysing data and discussing research findings.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The examination of the campaign speeches made by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu during his campaigns in the South-East Nigeria revealed that they were predominantly done in English. However, despite the use of Nigerian's official language and lingua franca, he managed to identify himself as an individual with different affinities with his audience. These affinities are broadly categorised into three groups, which are ethnic and cultural affinity, religious affinity, and age and social class affinity.

Ethnic and Cultural Affinity

Even though the president is Yoruba, he used language in ways that reflect his affinity with the ethnic group of his audience, who are predominantly Igbo. Excerpts 1 to 5 capture how he used language to show this affinity.

Excerpt 1: Ethnic and Cultural Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Imo State

- i. *Imo kwenu!*
- ii. *Igbo kwenu ooo!*

Excerpt 2: Ethnic and Cultural Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Enugu State

- i. *G and G, gbazuoagu gbazuoagu*
- ii. *Enugu, dalu.*
- iii. *Dalu, Coal City*
- iv. *Dalu*

Excerpt 3: Ethnic and Cultural Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Anambra State

- i. *Igbo kwenu*
- ii. *Hope Uzodimma, Onwa Imo*

Excerpt 4: Ethnic and Cultural Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Abia State

- i. *I salute you, Gbazuagu Gbazuagu*
- ii. *Na aziza, my sister*
- iii. *All that university na for Nkechi, Emenike*

Excerpt 5: Ethnic and Cultural Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Ebonyi State

- i. *I am even a titled chief, Ikedioramma*

Excerpts 1 to 5 show where the president used Igbo language, which is the language commonly used in South-East Nigeria. Among these excerpts were the use of the language to greet the audience (1.i, 1.ii, 3.i), name items in the community (4.ii), call the native names of people correctly (2.i; 3.ii; 4.i; 4.iii), appreciate his audience (2.ii – iv), and name his chieftaincy title (5.i).

Religious Affinity

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu is a Muslim but he made statements at the campaigns that showed his affinity to Christianity, which is the major religion of his audience. Excerpts 6 to 10 show his attempt at aligning with Christian religion in his speeches.

Excerpt 6: Religious Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Imo State

- i. *God bless you*

Excerpt 7: Religious Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Enugu State

- i. *God bless you.*
- ii. *God bless all of you.*

Excerpt 8: Religious Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Anambra State

- i. *We read in the Bible that before cock crows three times, he will deny Jesus Christ.*
- ii. *So, how can he keep a promise to you if he cannot keep his promise to God?*
- iii. *God bless you.*
- iv. *God Almighty will bless you.*

Excerpt 9: Religious Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Abia State

- i. *I pray to God Almighty to give you that might, determination, courage, and sincere effort to go to the polls with your PVC.*
- ii. *God bless you.*
- iii. *God Almighty will reward you.*

Excerpt 10: Religious Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Ebonyi State

- i. *God bless you.*
- ii. *God bless you guys*
- iii. *I promise you, in the name of God Almighty, He will spare our lives, spare your life, give you peace, give you joy, keep you in good health, keep Ebonyi going forward.*

The expressions captured under excerpts 6 to 10 are commonly used in Christian religious discourse. For example, “God bless you”, which the president used repeatedly in all the speeches, is a common religious collocation used by Christians. This is also the case with “God Almighty” and “Jesus Christ”. In addition, at the Anambra campaign, the president alluded to a popular story in the Bible, where Peter, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ, denied him. He used this story to attack his political opponent, who also bore that name.

Age and Social Class Affinity

The president is generally known as an individual of affluence and upper social class. However, he was able to show an affinity to different social classes, including the low class. He also managed to show affinity to individuals of different ages, including the youths. Excerpts 11 to 14 show how he used Nigerian Pidgin to achieve this social identity.

Excerpt 11: Age and Social Class Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Enugu State

- i. *Shine your eyes*
- ii. *Don't troway your vote.*
- iii. *Dem chop your money*
- iv. *Dem no get shame o.*
- v. *Dem say dey want to vote again, dey want to come back, sotee dey deceive your brother when he left kokoronko, he join labour.*

Excerpt 12: Age and Social Class Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Anambra State

- i. *Na lie lie*
- ii. *Anytime you hear Atiku say walahi talahi, just reply him say, na lie you lie.*

Excerpt 13: Age and Social Class Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Abia State

- i. *My brother, you go do that?*
- ii. *Now, March 11 don come. E dey, e close o.*
- iii. *I no dey doubt. I no dey fear.*
- iv. *Follow person wey know road o.*

Excerpt 14: Age and Social Class Affinity in the Campaign Speech at Ebonyi State

- i. *I wan go further o.*
- ii. *No be fight dem dey take do am, it's by discussion.*
- iii. *Ok, ok, city boys, make una hear me now.*
- iv. *I don hear you, make una hear me now.*
- v. *You wan rejoice?*

Excerpt 11 to 14 presents the use of Nigerian Pidgin to deliver messages to the audience during the APC presidential campaigns in the South-Eastern states in Nigeria. They also capture the use of slang (11.i, 13.v), onomatopoeic words (11.v) and endearment terms (13.1). The speaker used this language to make the speech less formal and also connect with all his listeners, irrespective of their social class and age.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of data revealed that the president of Nigeria constructed social identities that shifted from his ethnicity, religion, age and social class in the selected speeches. Considering that the president is Yoruba, he addressed his audience with the languages and language varieties that exist in their communities. That way, he took advantage of Nigerian diglossic situation to construct social identities that show his sameness with the audience.

This study discovered that the speaker, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, in his campaign speeches in the South-East states in Nigeria, used the English language, Igbo and Nigerian Pidgin to address his listeners. Though the English language is Nigeria's lingua franca and official language, which is also widely used in South-East Nigeria, it failed to provide the president with a room to construct a social identity that aligned with the ethnicity of his listeners, which is Igbo. As a result, he code-switched in Igbo language to construct this identity.

The president also adopted the Nigerian Pidgin to construct an identity that aligned with the language choice of the age groups, especially the youths, in attendance at the rally. This linguistic choice also shifted the president's speeches from a formal to an informal discourse, which further displayed him as a familiar persona to his audience. Put differently, he used Nigerian Pidgin to create an atmosphere of informality, which helped him to create the impression of being close, familiar, and at the same level with his listeners. In other words, he used the language to show sameness of social class and age. This observation confirms the arguments of Pable et al., Kalra and Danis, Kumar and Prakesh, and a host of other researchers, who hold that language is a tool for social identity construction.

Furthermore, though the English language could not provide rooms for the construction of social identities related to ethnicity and culture, the president successfully used it to show his affinity to the listeners' religion. He used the language to express some Christian collocations, such as "God bless you," "God Almighty", and "Jesus Christ", while delivering the speeches. He

also used it to allude to a biblical story while attacking his political opponent. As a Muslim, who faced criticism for having a Muslim running mate, the use of these linguistic choices is a political strategy that portrayed him as having knowledge of Christian religion and doctrines. As Tajuddin and Zulkepli explain, this knowledge implied that the president interacted frequently with Christians (3). This impression can make him more acceptable to the Christian folk because they will perceive him as a member of their social group and not as an out-group member.

Conclusion

The identity an individual displays can determine whether he will be accepted or rejected by the people around him. This simply means that people tend to show positive or negative bias to their in-group or out-group members, respectively. The findings of this study show that the incumbent president of Nigerian, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, is aware of this human social behaviour and hence constructed social identities that could help him win the votes and support of his audience. Fortunately, the Nigerian linguistic situation provided him with the political strategic tool for constructing such identities. Here, he utilised the languages spoken and commonly used by his target audience to create the impression of sameness, familiarity, and membership of their social groups. In other words, diglossia provides the linguistic tool Nigerian politicians can use to construct social identities that can boost their political strategies.

Works Cited

- Ahsan, Mukhtar, Fatima Tanveer, and Fatima Tanveer. "The Interplay of Language and Social Identity: A Comprehensive Sociolinguistic Review." *Migration Letters*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2024, pp. 162 – 172.
- Al-Brri, Qasem N., Mohammed F.A. Bani-Yaseen, Mohammed A. Al-Zu'bi, and Mesfer, S. Al-Hersh. "Diglossia among Students: The Problem and Treatment." *Journal of Education and Practice*, vol. 6, no. 32, 2015, pp. 14 – 20.
- Alexander, Saowanee.T., and Duncan McCargo. "Diglossia and Identity in Northeast Thailand: Linguistic, Social, and Political Hierarchy." *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2014, pp. 60 - 86.
- Alsahafi, Morad. "Diglossia: An Overview of the Arabic Situation." *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1 – 11.
- Alshehri, Somaya Ali M. "The Relationship between Language and Identity". *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, vol. 6, no. 7, 2023, pp. 156-161.
- Ashokkumar, Ashwini, and James W Pennebaker. "Tracking Group Identity through Natural Language within Groups." *PNAS Nexus*, vol. 1, 2022, pp. 1 – 9.

- Gervasio, Miriti, and Mary Karuri. "Marking Identity through Language in Social Media Discourse by Chuka University Students." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, vol. 7, no. 8, 2019, pp. 43 – 52.
- Kalra, Komal, and Wade Danis. "Language and Identity: The Dynamics of Linguistic Clustering in Multinational Enterprises." *Journal of World Businesses*, vol. 59, 2024, pp. 1 – 13.
- Koutchade, Innocent S. "Probing the Functions of Nigerian Pidgin English in FPO Akporobaro's *The Prostitute: A Stylistic Approach*." *British Journal of English Linguistics*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2020, pp. 21 – 33.
- Kumar, Rajesh, and Om Prakash. "Introduction." *Language, Identity and Contemporary Society*, edited by Rajesh Kumar and Om Prakash, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, pp. 1 – 10.
- Mutua, Paul, Joseph Maina, and Caroline K. Kimathi. "Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Language Use and Identity Construction among Women in Kitui West Constituency, Kenya." *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 7, 2024, pp. 1-13.
- Pable, Adrian, Marc Haas, and Noel Christe. "Language and Social Identity: An Integrationist critique." *Language Sciences*, vol. 32, 2010, pp. 671 – 676.
- Tajuddin, Siti N.A.A., and Noraini Zulkepli. "An Investigation of the Use of Language, Social Identity and Multicultural Values for Nation-Building in Malaysian Outdoor Advertising". *Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 18, 2019, pp. 1 – 10.
- Ukpe, Queen L. "The Nigerian Pidgin: A Tool in Promoting Societal Peace." *Journal of English Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2020, pp. 31 – 43.
- Walton, Hillary. "Investigating a New Psychological Variable in Second Language Acquisition: Comparing Social Identity across Canadian French Education Programmes." *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 7, 2022, pp. 1 – 12.