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Doing race and ethnicity in a digital community: Lexical labels and narratives of belonging in a Nigerian web forum

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ABSTRACT

In computer-mediated communication, social categories such as race and ethnicity have to be actively performed and constructed by participants in order to gain visibility; it can be argued that new forms of super-diversity and their sociolinguistic implications become particularly tangible here. As a consequence, such racialized discourse provides ideal material for a sociolinguistic analysis of CMC. Based on these assumptions, this study focuses on how race and ethnicity are performed on the web forum Nairaland, a digital community and place of interaction for Nigerian locals, first- and secondgeneration Nigerian emigrants, as well as participants with other ethnic backgrounds. A large-scale corpus (17 million token, time span of 4 years) was analyzed in terms of racial and ethnic identity construction of the community members; in particular, the use of Nigerian Pidgin as an ethnolinguistic repertoire within the community was taken into account. The analysis includes visualizations of the globalized community structure, a quantitative assessment of the distribution of racial and ethnic labels, and a qualitative close reading of diasporic narratives of belonging. The results of this study illustrate how the use and (often conscious) selection of ethnolinguistic repertoires contribute to the complex and varied racial/ethnical identities on display in the forum data. In this sense, this paper makes a contribution to our understanding of the sociolinguistic implications of super-diversity, and the essential role that digital mediation plays in its emergence.

1. Introduction

Within the fast-growing theoretical framework on super-diversity, the role of digital media in general and of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in particular holds a firm place. Thus the impact of communication technology is outlined in Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 4):

Historically, migration movements from the 1990s onwards have coincided with the development of the internet and mobile phones, and these have affected the cultural life of diaspora communities of all kinds. (…) These technologies impact on sedentary "host" communities as well, with people getting involved in transnational networks that offer potentially altered forms of identity, community formation and cooperation (Baron, 2008). In the first instance, these developments are changes in the material world – new technologies of communication and knowledge as well as new demographics – but for large numbers of people across the world, they are also lived experiences and sociocultural modes of life that may be changing in ways and degrees that we have yet to understand.

There should be little doubt about the general validity of this point, and the contributions within this special volume add some empirical leverage to the theoretical claims. Nevertheless, many open questions remain regarding the role of CMC in the emergence of super-diversity: for example, should mediated communication be seen as one monolithic factor that contributes to super-diversity, or is the digital impact on super-diversity linked to more specific innovations and time points, such as the emergence of social media? Is the increasing linguistic diversity on the internet as evidenced in Danet and Herring (2007) a prerequisite for, or a result of, digital super-diversity? Clearly, there is a lot of room for more fine-grained analyses of how super-diversity, mediated communication and the sociolinguistics of globalization are intertwined. This becomes particularly apparent with regard to migration, race and ethnicity – factors that are at the very core of the debate on super-diversity. Since race and ethnicity have to be actively performed and constructed by participants in CMC interactions in order to gain visibility, new forms of super-diversity and their sociolinguistic implications become particularly tangible here. As a consequence, such racialized discourse provides ideal material for a sociolinguistic analysis of CMC.

This paper is intended as a contribution to this field by analyzing how a globalized contact variety, in this case Nigerian Pidgin, is helped along by digital media, and how factors such as

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race, ethnicity and belonging are negotiated and linguistically represented in a particular digital community. It is part of a larger, ongoing project called "Cyber-Creole: Jamaican Creole and Nigerian Pidgin as contact varieties in globalized communication" focused on contact varieties as globalized vernaculars that are particularly used in mediated, mobile and diasporic contexts.[1] Web forums whose online communities function as large and diverse digital communities are the source of the data, which are downloaded and organized in the form of large-scale corpora (around 17 million tokens per forum); this corpus-based approach allows for analyses on multiple levels: visualizations and network models of the online community; quantitative analyses; and qualitative work. In this vein, the following study is structured as follows: after a brief outline of theoretical assumptions and central Nigerian identity concepts, Section 2 provides a closer look at the corpus itself and the mapping of the community. Section 3 summarizes a quantitative approach to racial and ethnic epithets in the data. Section 4 is a discourse-analytical close reading of such racialized discourse that focuses on narratives of belonging as they are put forward by members of the community. The findings are discussed and summarized in Section 5. Taken together, this multi-level analysis should provide a closer look at sociolinguistic implications of doing race and ethnicity online, such as styling, crossing (Rampton, 1995), and issues of linguistic self-perception and performance, and how these mechanisms play out in the context of digitally mediated discourse and its sociotechnical conditions.

1.1. From local vernacular to digital ethnolinguistic repertoire

As argued elsewhere (Heyd and Mair, forthcoming), it is generally accepted that the Internet is losing its status as "monolithically white and male" (Leung, 2005: 7) and is gradually becoming a place of more linguistic diversity. Indeed, it has been argued that digital media provide a semiotic system where race and ethnicity are actively showcased and articulated by its users (Nakamura, 2007). Regarding linguistic diversity, the work by Danet and Herring (2007) has provided evidence that this is true on the global scale but also for individual languages and their varieties. Thus nonstandard vernaculars are gaining in online presence and visibility. The persistence of written CMC and the community structure of forums allow for the development of writing standards in previously oral vernaculars. The global network also connects natives with more mobile emigrants in diasporic communities, and even outsiders who take an interest in the culture and linguistic practices of a particular ethnolinguistic community. In short, these tendencies point toward a gradual vernacularization of the web. As evidenced in the introductory quote by Rampton and Blommaert (2011), this phenomenon is well-recognized in the literature on super-diversity. It can be posited that the sociotechnical conditions of online communication seem to be conducive to the emergence of such digital, diasporic and deterritorialized vernaculars.

This sociotechnical setting allows for some further assumptions regarding Nigerian Pidgin as a globalized vernacular in the making. The following characteristics are strongly prominent in the data to be discussed here. First, the users in this online community display a very high level of metalinguistic awareness and reflexivity. This is in line with CMC studies quite in general; for example, Herring (2007: 15) notes: "The overall greater persistence of [CMC] heightens meta-linguistic awareness: It allows users to reflect on

their communication – and play with language – in ways that would be difficult in speech." It is probably also in the nature of such diasporic, polyphonous settings that communicants tend to be very self-aware of their language use.

The data also show early-stage signs of a commodification process for Nigerian Pidgin, which is strongly tied to the notions of medicalization and deterritorialization. There appears to be an emerging linguistic and pop-cultural prestige; concomitant factors, such as the emergence of a "Nollywood" movie industry and the launch of web interfaces and social media based in Nigerian Pidgin, are discussed in greater detail in Heyd and Mair (forthcoming).

Finally, Nigerian Pidgin and the other vernaculars found in the data are approached here as (digital) ethnolinguistic repertoires rather than static varieties, as has recently been proposed in contributions by Sharma (2011) or Benor (2010). In Benor's approach, the notion of an ethnolinguistic repertoire replaces that of an ethnolect or an ethnic variety in order to account for problems such as intra-group and intra-speaker variation; thus a specific ethnolinguistic repertoire may serve as "a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities." (Benor, 2010: 160) In this approach, Nigerian Pidgin would represent one ethnolinguistic repertoire that is characterized by a set of distinctive linguistic features on different levels of linguistic description, in particular lexical and (morpho-)syntactic features. The degree to which a speaker of Nigerian Pidgin uses these features may be dependent on his or her background and situational factors. In this sense, many of the examples shown in the subsequent analysis would not qualify as instances of Nigerian Pidgin in conventional analysis, as they may contain only very few, sometimes inconspicuous markers of the variety; in an ethnolinguistic repertoires approach, such 'minimalistic' usage of a repertoire is seen as legitimate and tailored to the situational needs of a speaker/user. In addition, this approach, which ties in sociolinguistic notions such as indexicality (Eckert, 2008) with ethnolectal research, seems particularly apt to capture the linguistic behavior found in online communication: as argued elsewhere, "in some respects the digital vernaculars are actually richer than the ones spoken on the ground, because writers may exploit visual resources (e.g. expressive spellings) or explore new modes of contact and combination among varieties and languages for which the new medium provides opportunities." (Heyd and Mair, forthcoming). Therefore, Nigerian Pidgin and its usage in the Nairaland data are treated in the following as a digital ethnolinguistic repertoire.

1.2. Dimensions of identity in Nigerian society and the Nairaland corpus

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, and it is safe to say that ethnic/tribal affiliation remains the central reference point of identity for many Nigerians at home and also abroad. The biggest ethnic groups Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo are well-represented in the corpus analyzed here; their respective languages are used in the forum and receive particular metalinguistic attention in threads of linguistic diversity and performance such as "If You Can Speak Yoruba, Talk It In Here!" or "Be Proud To Speak Hausa Language Here".

By contrast, the nationhood of Nigeria, and by extension citizenship as a concept for identification, remains a highly problematic and contested issue. The colonial past, the conflict between ethnic and religious groups, persistent problems in political leadership, and the western exploitation of the oil industry are but a few recurring problems in the perception of Nigeria as a nation; they are extensively referred to and discussed in the forum data. However, this picture may slowly be changing:

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[1] Thus Jamaican Creole has been shown to be widely available as a target for crossing and similar forms of linguistic appropriation. It is part of the ongoing analysis to monitor whether Nigerian Pidgin is following suit in this dynamics. See Moll (2012), Mair (2013) for results from the Jamaican Creole subcorpus.