

Cyber-Naija and Homegirls on the Web: Creating Place in Cyberspace

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Abstract: The present contribution is offered as an essay in linguistically informed cultural studies. It emerges from the author's research on language use in postcolonial diasporic web-forums from West Africa (Nigeria, Cameroon) and the Caribbean (Jamaica). The theoretical foundations and methodological principles of the research are described in detail elsewhere (Mair 2012, 2013, 2014; Mair & Heyd, 2014). For the present purpose, the facts discussed here are important.

1. Introduction: Cyber-Diasporas and the Globalisation of Vernacular Linguistic Resources

The work is interdisciplinary, placing itself at the interfaces of corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, the discourse analysis of computer-mediated communication, and postcolonial studies. It is based on the systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of very large amounts of text drawn from the well-known "Nairaland" web forum (www.nairaland.com) – to be precise on 244,048 posts, comprising a total of 17.3 million words and produced by and 11,718 members between the years 2005 and 2008.

This discussion forum serves both Nigerians residents in Nigeria and members of the global Nigerian diaspora, with the aim of providing a link between the historic 'home' of the community and its far-flung diasporic outposts. Obviously, participants do not

form a speech community in the traditional sense of the term, but the regularly active core members can nevertheless be said to constitute a "community of practice" (Meyerhoff 2003) coming together around a shared interest in Nigeria and her (postcolonial) predicaments.

The textual data are not literary or fictional. Many are entirely mundane in nature (e.g. practical advice for recent immigrants to Britain, Canada or the US on how to deal with bureaucratic red tape). A fair proportion of the material, though, is centred around issues of identity and authenticity, such as threads on "Africans In America Who Have Decided To Live the 'urban' Ghetto Lifestyle" (<http://www.nairaland.com/634430/africans-america-decided-live-urban>) or "None [sic] Nigerians Trying To Act Nigerian" (<http://www.nairaland.com/500771/none-nigerians-trying-act-nigerian>), and

these texts tend to display considerable verbal creativity, rhetorical styling and elements of dramatic performance. For such performances, many participants can rely on multilingual and multidialectal style repertoires, which – given the diasporic situation they find themselves in – are often very complex and used with considerable dexterity.

The original thrust of the research project was to emphasise the mobility of linguistic resources in the contemporary world's rapidly changing transnational *mediascapes* and *ethnoscapes* (Appadurai 1996) and to shine a light on *global linguistic flows* (Alim, Ibrahim and Pennycook, eds. 2009) – in contradistinction to traditional models of World Englishes (e.g. Kachru 1992, Schneider 2007), which mainly rely on the often weak postcolonial nation state and its territorial boundaries as the top-level criterion for the classification of varieties of English around the world. For the digital diasporas which we have investigated, the internet is not a 'non-place', a boundary-less space in which anything is possible. Rather, members of the digital diaspora stake out their place in cyberspace through a variety of linguistic and semiotic strategies, and they link their metaphorical place in cyberspace to offline geographical locations and social domains in systematic ways.

To put the aim of the present contribution in a nutshell: in a project which has largely focussed on participants' linguistic behaviour when they are away from 'home' – be it physically, in the diaspora, or metaphorically, on the World Wide Web –, I would now like to add the complementary perspective and ask the

question: how do they conceive of home?

In my previous studies (Mair 2012, 2014, 2016), I concentrated on a basic quantitative analysis of the data, based on the visualisation of the amounts of linguistic activity which can be related to specific countries and cities. This is largely irrelevant to the concerns of the present study, whose focus is not on such large-scale quantification and visualisation of the data, but on a qualitative analysis of how forum participants use language to signal home, identity and belonging.

2. Standard and Nonstandard English: Practical and Emotional Discourses of Place and Home

The first step towards creating an online identity is the selection of a name. To give a few examples from the Nigerian forum: Chiogo (who will return in an analysis of one of her posts below) sends an ethnic (Igbo) and a gender signal (female). Oziamotv signals affiliation with Igbo language and culture and the Christian faith (oziamo = 'gospel') – and an indirect reference to Treviso (= TV), this participant's Italian city of residence.

The issue of 'home' is addressed more directly in the name Homegirl, adopted by one of the less prolific contributors to the Nigerian forum. As her posts reveal that Homegirl attended school and works in the US, the intended meaning is probably not the traditional one ("a young woman or girl who likes home or staying at home; a domesticated, shy or unworldly woman or girl," OED, s.v. homegirl), but veers between two more recent and originally US ones also listed in the OED: "woman or girl from one's home town, region, or neighbourhood"

and "African-American or Hispanic woman, esp. one who is from an inner-city area or who is a member of a street gang. In later use also: a woman or girl belonging to the hip-hop subculture." Divided loyalties are expressed in the name USnajibgirl, which combines neutral reference to the United States and the locally marked and emotionally charged variant Naija for Nigeria.

Creative use of multilingual, standard and nonstandard linguistic resources is not only in evidence in the creation of names, but also in many of the posts to the forum themselves. The following text produced by Chigo gives a good idea of how US and Nigerian nonstandard English can be used to signal stance – and how the stance thereby signalled need not necessarily coincide with the ideas and views openly expressed. The topic of this particular thread is "Nigerians & Foreign Accent", its (female) author one of the regular and prolific contributors to the forum in the period from 2007 to 2011:

Like i have cousins who are born here, even though their parents speak igbo to them, they understand but they can't speak it. And they all got igbo names, no english name and they say it with this accent, makin' their names sound funny. I just be crackin' up when they call eachother 'cause they can't really pronounce their names in d real way a naija would pronounce it. But You can't blame them, they call themselves Nigerian-americans and they are 'cause they're all grown and have only been to naija once. What am sayin' is that i find it annoyin' if You're a real JJC and then You come out and be speakin' like that. uh uh. And all these people in naija

who don't even live here and speak like that inside naija. c'mon, that makes no sense. who You frontin' for? lol.
(<http://www.nairaland.com/54330/nigerians-foreign-accents>, emphases mine)

The argument of the passage is straightforward: Mild censure is reserved for second-generation Nigerians who still bear Nigerian (Igbo) names, but are otherwise Americanised in language and culture; strong criticism, on the other hand, is levelled at those who propagate American speechways within Nigeria itself.

The linguistic make-up of the short text, however, is more complex. The baseline style is a neutral to colloquial North American English, as is marked by nonstandard in'-spellings for the participles, which are used consistently, or the use of 'cause for because. In addition, there are the international conventions of Netspeak, for example the abbreviation lol. In spite of criticising others for adopting American speechways, this first-generation immigrant adopts habitual be, a high-profile grammatical feature of African American English, herself (I just be crackin' up = 'I tend to / usually crack up ...'). Who You frontin' for displays another typical feature of this variety, the copula-less progressive, and in addition features the type of urban slang popularised globally through rap and hip hop (to front = 'act in an inauthentic way', 'not keeping it real'). In the same breath, however, the writer uses features of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin which are not widely familiar outside a Nigerian context. Naija is an informal version of 'Nigeria', 'Nigerian',

occasionally also used as a name for Nigerian Pidgin. JJC is short for 'Johnny just come,' which refers to an inexperienced newcomer or a 'greenhorn.'

Use of African American English alongside Nigerian Pidgin is more consistent with a name such as USnajibgirl, who actually comments on her multiple allegiances:

And why does it bother You the way I rep where I'm from? What's wrong with stating that I have cultural heritage that spans back to Aruondizogu Nigeria, is because I know precisely where my lineage is from? ?Angry Yes, I'm American (1st born gen.) but I know where my people are from, so why am I not entitled to claim it?

[...] the best Aruondizogu-Imo State-SE-Niger Delta-Igbo-Nigerian-American-Michigan girl You've eva met.? Kiss? (<http://www.nairaland.com/usnajibgirl/posts>)

Against such a background, the combination of North American urban slang (rep where I'm from = 'proudly represent one's community / neighbourhood') and the Nigerian localism Naija is not incongruous any more.

The three anchors of the in-group mental map of the Nigerian diaspora are Naija, "home", Jand, which comprises London, England and the UK, and Yankee, a cover term for the whole of the US. The three terms are illustrated in the following strongly emotional context:

Like I always say, I BE NAIJA TILL I DIE, I go go yankee or Jand, BUt NAIJA NA MY BLOOD, Na for my eye this country go become great pass

the ones wey my Papa or grand pa talk about. NAIJA FOR LIFE (<http://www.nairaland.com/13295/why-nigerians-negative-nigeria/1>)

They also fit well into the following utopian fantasy, which turns the current global balance of power on its head:

The Nigeria of my dreams is a place where British and American people play lottery so that they can come and work and live in the best Nigerian run companies and environment.....

Its a place where they have to apply for a visa with a humiliating process in order to get one and even then they are not assured of one!!

Its a place that I would be proud to take any of my British friends!!

Its a place where I will hate to leave in order to come and do some work in Jand or Yankee.... (<http://www.nairaland.com/4356/whatt-nigeria-dreams-like>)

3. Narratives of Belonging, Told on the Move

A phenomenon commonly encountered in the data – and one which has direct bearing on the topic 'home' – are narratives of belonging. These have been studied by Heyd (2014). Heyd and Honkanen (2015: n. p.) present an example of the genre in its minimal form:

My dad is from Oko in Anambra state,my mom is from Dallas, Texas[usa].I was born in Huntsville,Alabama.I went to Naija for 4 years.Now,I be original Igbo man[I na-ghota] (<http://www.nairaland.com/thundathug/posts>)

Linguistically, this narrative displays yet another instance of the mobilisation of diverse linguistic resources to reflect a diverse identity and to signal subjective stance in the communicative situation.

The very name of the poster, Thundathug, indexes affiliation with North American urban street culture. Family relations are expressed through informal American English (dad and mom). Note that, in spite of the claimed Igbo identity, the Nigerian-born father is not referred to as *nna*. But Nigerianness is expressed through the use of *Naija* for Nigeria and the brief switch into Nigerian Pidgin (I be original Igbo man). Igbo is present in the final tag *I na-ghota*, which literally means 'you have to pick' but roughly has the same function as utterance-final *you see* or *you know* in English. In order to appreciate the expressive potential of such rhetorical strategies, it is best to translate the text into neutral Standard English for comparison:

My father is from Oko in Anambra State, my mother is from Dallas, Texas. I was born in Huntsville, Alabama. I went to Nigeria for four years. Now, I'm a genuine Igbo man, you see.

In this sanitised form the same story makes bland reading indeed.

4. Conclusion

In this experiment in linguistically informed cultural studies I have used web-forum data produced by a Nigerian diasporic community in order to explore how the community's multidialectal and multilingual resources help members (i) to define a place of their own on the World Wide Web, (ii) to negotiate what is "home" and "foreign / abroad" in the diasporic context, and (iii) more

generally to signal personal identity and subjective stance in the communicative situation.

The wider background of the research is defined by contemporary cultural globalisation. Two theoretical concepts which have proved helpful in understanding what is going on in the digital diasporas investigated are the fast-changing transnational ethnoscapes and mediascapes, which Appadurai (1996) has seen as the social and cultural complements of the global finanscape and technoscape (which represent the economic and technological hard-wiring of globalisation). Manuel Castells (2010), theoretician of the global network society, has seen the transition from a traditional and stable "space of places" to a more dynamic but unstable "space of flows" as one of the hallmarks of contemporary culture: The textual and linguistic volatility and mobility that the web and the social media display is clearly a prime example of this trend. But in spite of all the dynamism and mobility, a community of users has managed to turn a simple homepage, www.nairaland.com, into a vibrant and creative cultural and linguistic space of their own. Nigerians resident in Nigeria and in the global Nigerian diaspora have collaborated to help create "cyber-Naija", a part of the World-Wide Web which is very likely bigger and certainly much more interesting than the country's top-level national domain .ng.

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