



**Research Article**

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## The language factor in identity politics: An exploratory research

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**Abstract:** This paper essentially interrogates the language factor in identity politics. It perceives identity politics as inevitable in societal affairs. Language is viewed from the paper's functionalist perspective, whereby the language concept is interwoven with human existence. The work further investigates what it sees as a dilemma in language deployment under identity politics. The problem of the study thus centers on how language achieves its communicative purposes in its deployment under identity politics. The paper accordingly hypothesizes that the language question is intertwined with identity issues. The methodology of the research is nonquantitative, basically relying on nonnumerical presentation. The theoretical framework is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Under this theoretical template, the article focused on how group power dealings are determined and strengthened through language utilization. The contribution finally concludes that language's communicative purposes can only be achieved in identity politics under mutually beneficial standards or multicultural paradigms.

**Keywords** – Critical discourse analysis, Identity politics, Identity questions, Identity, Language

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The language concept is interwoven with human existence. It is integral to communication and invariably central to the survival of Homo sapiens. It is estimated that there are about 7,000 languages in the world (Wójtowicz, 2020; Boroditsky, 2018). The language question is also intertwined with identity issues. Some languages have even gone extinct, implying they no longer have speakers, particularly if the language is without living progenies. Some others are adjudged dead, especially when they are no more the native language of any people, even if the language is still in use (Grenoble & Whaley, 2005; Strohlic, 2018). In Nigeria, the Ajawa language became extinct between 1920 and 1940 as the speakers switched to Hausa (Blench, 2012). Ajawa was formerly spoken in the present Bauchi State of the country. Still, in Nigeria, the Basa-Gumna language also became extinct. Expressed in the Chanchaga area of Nigeria's Niger state and the Nasarawa state of the Nigerian nation, its speakers again shifted to Hausa (Blench, 2012). Latin is probably the most renowned dead language. There is also the dead language of Sanskrit (the ancient language of Hinduism) still used in many religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism (Bilingua, 2018).



In identity politics, language is central to success in its functionalist perspectives. It is expected to command legitimacy among its users and invariably deployed in obtaining victory for them in identity politics (against the detractors of its users). But this same language will need to be heard and understood by the language users' traducers, giving rise to the language dilemma in identity politics. This paper focuses on how language achieves its communicative purposes in these regards. The work is further executed under the following subheadings: theorizing language, defining identity politics, theoretical framework (critical discourse analysis), interrogating the perceived dilemma, and then a conclusion. The methodology of the paper is nonquantitative and centers on logical argumentation.

## 2. THEORIZING LANGUAGE

The role of language in the progression of human culture is pivotal. Then there are essentially, two reigning linguistic paradigms to the understanding of language - the formalist and the functionalist perspectives. The formalist viewpoint sees language as a formal system, a collectivity of multiplicative laws or sentence structures, which permits a "distinct similarity" of an attractive sequence of representations, and images or sentences, assigning to each, a tree-like structure of hierarchies. The fundamental usage of language thus becomes the shaping of thoughts, with its communicative dimension becoming supplementary (Kolodny & Edelman, 2018). This formalist/structuralist view of language owes its origin to Ferdinand de Saussure, and his contribution remains foundational for many other approaches to language studies (Campbell, 2001; De Saussure, 2011). But under the functionalist approach, language is essentially communicative. This makes it characteristically communal and equally promotes semantics (and more generically, perceptions and cognitions) to standards of fundamental consequence in linguistic theorization. "Grammar still plays a central role as the tool for encoding meanings into a form that can be easily transmitted via the available gestural (acoustic or other) channel and for decoding the messages on the receiving end" (Kolodny & Edelman, 2018, p.3). Under the functionalist perspective, language basically serves the communicative needs of its users (Evans & Levinson, 2009; Macaulay, 2011; Kolodny & Edelman, 2018).

Then Kolodny and Edelman (2018) add a third viewpoint under which they presume that language comprises of a tool kit that essentially supports individuals in winning over the state and the tendencies of others (and possibly self also). There is additionally the issue of language as cultural transmission. This denotes a course of action under which a language is transmitted from one generation to future generations. Yule (2016), in this context, highlights that although human beings are born with some predispositions towards the acquisition of language in a generic sense, humans are born devoid of the capacity for utterances in specific languages. Hence, the first language is acquired by children under cultural contexts. But how did language evolve? Scholars have expended considerable energy on this question, from the theory of protolanguage and the transition thereof to modern language (Zywczyński, Gontier & Wacewicz, 2017). The question then persists: Where did language come from? Did it come from monkeys? According to Rauschecker (2018), at first glance, the monkey's brain seems similar to a smaller type of the brain of human beings. The language enables Homo sapiens to understand and to create sentence structures, speech patterns, visual symbols or images, signs and sounds, imbued with instructive substances at a multiplicity of temporal levels (Kikuchi, Sedley, Griffiths & Petkov, 2018). Language is, therefore, a potent instrument of interaction and meaning transmission, enabling the illumination of humans' plans and equally a highly powerful mechanism for achieving humanity's daily goals.

Additionally, language is a pungent means of conveying communication and transmitting emotional states and philosophies. Language and discourse thus, bring together, organize and validate knowledge, group relationships,



and coordination (Ali, 2011). In the viewpoints of Macaulay (2011) therefore, the most vital part of language is that it communicates meaning. So without this quality of meaning communication, language translates to an irrelevant exercise. Yet, determining what meaning means in a language is problematic. Macaulay (2011), however, concludes that whatever language is, and however it is stored in the brain, it is a highly effective system of communication among human beings. What bearing does language then have with the meaning of identity politics? But first, what is identity politics?

### 3. WHAT IS IDENTITY POLITICS

To commence the conceptualization of identity politics in this contribution begins with the identification of the meaning of identity. Citing Burke (2004) therefore, Pöggel, Hilser, Kebler, Aboytes and Beyers (2020: 1) assert that “identities are the sets of meanings people hold for themselves that define ‘what it means’ to be who they are as persons, as role occupants, and as group members”. According to Muir (2007), identity is a fluid and complex process in which meaning is constantly being contested, negotiated, and asserted. Neofotistos (2013) consequently submits that identity politics, otherwise referred to as identity-based politics or the politics of identity, is generally used in the humanities and social sciences to denote the identity concept's deployment in promoting political claims framing political ideologies, or stimulating and orientating political group action. This is invariably executed in the larger contexts of injustice and inequality, usually aimed at asserting social distinctiveness and particularities or gaining recognition and power.

Neofotistos (2013) further deposes that identity politics alludes to the struggles and tensions over the rights to determine or define the fixed “essence” and contours of specific social groups. Hence, identity politics in anthropological studies entails studying the politics of difference. Heyes (2018), on the other hand, posits that “the laden phrase” of identity politics currently signifies some wide-ranging theorizing and political activities framed on common experiences of certain group members, bordering on injustice. Identity political formations, Heyes concludes, are typically aimed at securing the political freedom of particular constituencies, marginalized within their broader contexts, as members of specific constituencies reclaim or assert the ways of comprehending their uniqueness. Identity politics is accordingly aimed at challenging the orthodoxy of dominant oppressive characterization, under the essential goal of self-determination. It is reinforced by awareness creation (Anyuor, 2021). Identity politics is anchored on this formation of communal consciousness.

### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This contribution is framed on the theory of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which perceives language as a brand of the social procedure (Fairclough, 1995). CDA differs from discourse analysis. This is because it further highlights issues of manipulation, exploitation, power asymmetries, and structural inequities in domains such as politics, media, and education (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Yatsko, 2018). CDA further goes beyond these points to emphasize ideologies and power relations involved in discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1998). It advocates interventionism in social practices and critically investigates particular discourses, and overtly supports strong commitments to empowerment, change, and practice-orientedness (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Holes and Fairclough (1995) played pivotal roles in the founding of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as pedagogical and epistemological hues. But within the larger gamut of CDA, there is the critical language awareness (CLA) perspective, referring to an understanding of the ideological, political, and social aspects of linguistic variation, language, and discourse and describable as a pedagogical presentation of CDA, which is generically a major research approach (Ali, 2011; Luke, 2012; Wetzel & Rogers, 2015).



Ali (2011) further sees CLA from the linkages between language and its social construction and relevance. The Critical Language Awareness perspective, therefore, refers to the idea that language traditions and language tendencies are imbued with power associations and ideological procedures unknown to the people. It focuses on how language is deployed in dominating, manipulating, and subjugating others (Fairclough, 2014). The development of CLA drew from the traditions of language awareness and critical discourse analysis (Huang, 2013: 65). CLA is thus concerned with language awareness as social practice and how language is intricately tied to power relations (Huang, 2013: 66). In applying CDA to this paper, the teaching contexts are transcended, whilst reinforcing the critical dimensions of language awareness, as a definite entity of language deployment, as the character of contemporary society necessitates more focus on critical language awareness, within a larger context of inculcating in citizens the need for an effective democracy, which translates to respect for all people(s) and greater freedom for them (Ali, 2011). In general, the critical perspectives (such as critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical language awareness), are all concerned with the potential of language and education, for social justice purposes (Huang, 2013). Identity politics is also about social justice. In the application of CDA to this study, therefore, it is recognized that its subset of CLA possesses the potential for the construction and reconstruction of identities (Huang, 2013).

## **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OR METHODS**

Logical argumentation is the principal method of analysis in the paper. Thus, under the article's exploratory designs, field experiments and numerical data collection (and presentation) have been eliminated. This accords with the multidisciplinary ambitions of contributing to interrogating issues embedded in the humanities and social sciences. It further provides room for research continuity in the same regard, possibly under quantitative designs.

## **6. INTERROGATING A DILEMMA**

Fundamentally, language serves its users and achieves their purposes. Language is accordingly used in meeting the communicative needs of its users. In identity politics, this same language will need to be heard and understood by the traducers of the language users. And here is the dilemma – to speak in the language to be understood by your members and your adversaries. There are legions of identities. But each identity has a language. Identity politics, therefore, entails the speaking of various languages. Then identity politics is played against marginalization and subjugation. But often, the antagonist only understands a language that is different from that of the marginalized. How then would the marginalized speak so that members of the opposition will hear and understand them, and the opposition also heard and understood by the putatively or apparently marginalized? This is the language dilemma. When, for instance, the marginalized in Africa (more specifically in South Africa) propagate the ideology of “Ubuntu” would their nonAfrican traducers understand “Ubuntu”, which Chukwuere (2020) underscores as simply referring to “humanity”?

Under CDA, it is taken for granted that the language of identity politics is the oppressed's language. But it may not be the language of the oppressor. Commenting on the occasioning quandary regarding the left-of-the-center politics in the United States' democracy, Fukuyama (2018) argues that the identity politics of “the left” in the country threatens freedom of speech and the genre of critical discourse necessary for the sustenance of democracy. Fukuyama (2018) contends that in the political arena of liberal democracies, there is the commitment to protect citizens' rights to full freedom of expression in an open market of ideas. But the concerns about identity (politics) have contradicted this necessity of civic discourses. Consequently, the attention to lived experience by identity



groups gives precedence to the emotive realm of consciousness over the balanced and logical consideration of critical issues in the world outside the inner self. It prioritizes subjectively but sincerely held positions over processes of logical deliberations that may compel people to jettison their previous opinions. Assertions that are considered distasteful to someone else's sense of self-esteem are consequently perceived as grounds for clamping down on the person(s) who made the assertion.

In the Nigerian state context, identity politics is typified by the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Chukwunka, 2017; Nzube, Emmanuel & Nwagbo, 2018). IPOB is engaged in what the Nigerian government considers insurgency at best (government actually, contentiously considers IPOB activities as terrorism) (Adangor, 2018). The separatist group agitates for a restoration of the defunct Republic of Biafra, which attempted to break away from the newly independent Nigeria in 1967 but was defeated in the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-1970). The leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra is Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, undoubtedly a popular and effective leader among his members. Kanu is a competent user of the Igbo language and a skillful communicator. But his language and communication are only easily understood by his embattled members, whereas the language of identity politics must be understood on the other side. Invariably, power-equations are integral to identity politics. In what language are the embedded power-expressions conveyed to the oppressors by the independence-seeking group-members whose vernacular is not actually understood by the traducing side? Okon (2020) highlights that power is conceivable as individuals' or groups' capacity to impose their will on others. In what language is this imposition usually conveyed and understood under divergent language scenarios?

Furthermore, identity politics on one side begets identity politics on the other side (or other sides). The language of identity politics cannot then maintain validity on one-sided correctness. Still, in the Nigerian context of IPOB, the group's membership is predominantly South-East Nigerian Igbos, who were also the principal fighters of the Nigeria-Biafra war on the Biafran side. Then following continuing IPOB agitations in the country, the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum (AYCF) also emerged from the Northern axis of the nation, mainly populated by the Hausa-Fulani (the three major ethnic blocs in Nigeria are the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and the Igbos) (Ahmad, 2017; Akhaine, Alabi & Adeyemi, 2017; Akinloye, 2017). The AYCF challenges IPOB under a political identity banner and also speaks an identity politics language the IPOB members hardly comprehend. The language-identity politics dilemma is further illustrated from a gender angle in this paper. Empirical and scholarly evidence does not yet suggest a retreat in global gender imbalance (Araújo & Fontainha, 2017; Nagaraj, Goh, Cheong, Tey & Jani, 2017; O'Connor, 2019; Nyamkoh & Ngwa, 2021).

Agbofa et al. (2020) assert that globally women are still underrepresented in socio-political estimates. The gender question from the women's angle is undoubtedly an issue of identity politics. In what language have the women gender activists been speaking that have made them not to be understood? When they speak under their identity politics about female menstrual cycles, does it help their male opposition to understand their needs? When they fail to speak in such one-sided tones and adopt the feminist-equality language with their male counterparts, has it guaranteed attention and understanding for the female gender activists? Beyond the focus on female gender campaigners, there are universal, institutional actors in gender questions. In what language have the institutional actors been speaking for them to be understood? Have they been speaking only in a female voice, devoid of male agenda?



## 7. CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The paper repositions the issues of identity politics as potent global topics. It highlights the criticality of the language factor in the achievement of the objectives of identity politics. Future research efforts in these regards are recommended to be undertaken under more specific social contexts and quantitative constructs.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The language factor in identity politics borders on intercultural encounters and survival, and the language of their execution. Epistemologically, within generic linguistic traditions, this work has focused on the functionalist perspective of language and its communicative imperatives. The paper emphasizes the centrality of the language factor in identity politics while interrogating some embedded dilemmas in its deployment. It is argued in the contribution that beyond its atomistic tendencies, identity politics is expected to lead to greater freedom and respect for all people(s) and parties. The authors have attempted an exposé on the social, political, and ideological aspects of discourse by referring to how language is used in manipulating and subjugating others. The work accordingly concludes that language's communicative purposes in identity politics can only be achieved under mutually beneficial or multicultural paradigms.

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