

The Lingo-Cultural Construction of Nigerian Identity

By

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Abstract

The confluence of language and identity has been variously explored. However, studies that have applied critical discourse analysis given its relative newness, to the explication of the nexus between language and identity construction particularly in the Nigerian context, are still lacking. In order to cover this gap, I focus on critical discourse analysis as a theoretical framework in illuminating the nexus of language, cultural practices and identity construction. I have used few instances of language use to indicate the peculiar ways in which English is used in the Nigerian sociolinguistic matrix. I submit that the manner some Nigerian novelists use language in their literary initiatives can become a platform for the construction of a Nigerian identity. I also pointed out that the use of language in non-literary situations points a direction to the emergence of what can be considered Nigeria's linguistic and cultural identity.

Keywords: CDA, Discourse, Linguistic identity, Cultural identity, Nigerian identity

Introduction

The fact that people are generally concerned about who they are and how other people think of them implies that identity is an important human phenomenon. My concern in this paper is to draw attention to the intersection between language and the construction of Nigerian identity employing the techniques of critical discourse analysis. Erikson defines a nation-state as "a state dominated by an ethnic group, whose markers of identity are frequently embedded in its official symbolism and legislation" (2010, p.119). If Erikson's definition is to be followed closely, it will be quite difficult to describe Nigeria as a nation-state. This conjecture is not too far to seek because Nigeria is a culturally and ethnically diverse society that is historically shaped by colonialism even postcolonialism. But this does not apply to Nigeria alone. There is hardly a homogenous country in the world today, marking the fluidity and arbitrariness of nationality or nationhood. Every nation state has linguistic, cultural and historical attributes that distinguish it from other nations. Nigeria, as a nation state, has her linguistic and cultural attributes that differentiate her from other nations of the world. These peculiar attributes are what constitute Nigeria's identity, for national identity is determined by the way we understand nation. Despite the summation that Nigerians "have become slaves to their ethnic groups rather than employing these diversities towards the nation's unity, progress and development (Odumayak&Ishaya 2017, p. 260), I argue that Nigerians' use of language and cultural similarities point a direction to the construction of a Nigerian identity.

Identity as Discourse

Discourse analysis is generally concerned with the use of language in context-specific ways. It is also interested in highlighting the nexus between people's use of language and the construction of identities in socio-discursive encounters. I, therefore, follow the more

deconstructionist stance – the macro-critical perspective, where the term "discourse" is interrogated from a critical paradigm. Discourse, as used within critical analytic model, has an extended meaning as "Its focus of interest goes beyond the immediate context in which language is being used by a speaker or writer" (Burr 2003, p.63) to concentrate on the extralinguistic factors that underlay the communicative situation in which utterances occur. It transcends mere use of language to examining linguistic practices in order to explain the hidden significations of texts. It can also be seen as mode of action, as ways of doing things with language, things such as constructing identities. The fact is that discourse is often realized in a conversation or other spoken interactions as well as written texts of all kind.

Macro-critical discourse has been heavily influenced by Michael Foucault. The Foucauldian approach to discourse has also been taken up by scholars who are interested in issues of identity, ideology subjectivity, power relations and social change and by those who see discourse as a social event. Discourse, understood by Foucault, are "practices which form the objects of which they speak" (1972, p. 49). This explains the relation between discourses and the world of things that we inhabit. Discourse, therefore, "refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event, person or class of persons, a particular way of representing it in a certain light" (Burr 2003, p. 64). Deducible from Burr's view of discourse, which is a furtherance of Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse, is the conjecture that there are different ways of representing the world. Expressed differently, there is no monolithic or singular approach to understanding the way things work in reality. Consequently, what we do or say, as people, are instances of discourses. Our preference to present things in one way rather than another is a clear example of discursive situations. In a similar thought, MacKay (2007, p.3) persuasively argues that discourses are: sub-cultures within a larger culture or society. In this sense, a person can belong to many sub-cultures (Discourses) at the same time. Within each Discourse that a person belongs to, there are common identities, beliefs, and ways of thinking, feeling, and being that are recognizable as both appropriate and defining of membership to other members of the Discourse.

It is along such dialectics that members of a *Discourse* see others as either "in-group" or "out-group". Moreover, to belong to a *Discourse* suggests that the *Discourse* echoes the identities of its members. Foucauldian discourse can shed light on the discursive nature of identity in that it sees the person as the subject of various discourses and subjectivities. It allows us to examine the material conditions and social structures that form the context of language use. Foucauldian postulation has its short comings, its tenets can help us to understand the discourse of nationhood. Foucauldian discourse, for example, "emphasizes the way that the forms of language available to us set limits upon, or at least strongly channel, not only what we can think and say, but also what we can do or what can be done to us" (Burr, 2003, p.63). In the Nigerian material structure, for example, the husband is positioned as the head of the family. The husband-material discursive representation manifests in providing the basic needs of the family, as well as security. While the discourse of husband in the Nigerian context is acceptable to many a Nigerian, it will be problematic for us to expect such a discourse in non- Nigerian societies. Foucauldian discourse identifies the discourses operating in a particular area of life and examines the implications for subjectivity, practice and power relations that these have. This Foucauldian perspective aligns with the ways identities are formulated.

Identity, within the critical paradigm, does not strictly adhere to the essentialist postulate of "pre-giveness" because it depends on how language users position themselves as well as

others in the discourse. For instance, to say that something is this or that does not imply identifying some essential feature, but the identifier doing the identification clarify my view by focusing on the use of the expressions prostitute and sex worker as examples of how identity and identification work as linguistic events which are backgrounded by ideological sentiments. The meaning or meanings of these expressions depend on the view of the user within the linguistic encounter in which the expression is used. The expression prostitute might connote a cultural discourse where the user thinks the referent is being abnormal" For example, in postcolonial Nigeria, although the set of indulging in sexual encounters for financial gains exists, the practice is abhorred by many. To use the word prostitute, then is to discursively condemn the act. On the other hand, the user of "commercial sex worker" identifies the referent as one who is engaged in a legitimate livelihood. In this way, the language user identifies or solidarises with the "worker" It is at this intersection that Haug (2007, p. 6) comments thus: "All this indicates that certain linguistic phenomena can be handled naturally only by recourse to extralinguistic, pragmatic factors such as context, real-world knowledge, and inference". It is pertinent to point out that the same words, phrases or expressions might appear in different communicative genres, referring to rather different discourses. It seems plausible to agree that "no matter how much we know about the social context of discourse, we cannot predict what a particular person will say in a given instance, or how it will be interpreted by another person" (Johnstone 2008, p. 157).

The implication is that words, phrases or utterances do not belong to any particular discourse, but the meanings we give them situate them within specific discourses. In a more persuasive manner, Burr points out that "Our identity is constructed out of discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw our communications with other people" (2003, p. 106). It follows that an individual's identity is intricately woven by several different elements. An individual can be a child, an old person; an individual is classed according to income, occupation and level of education, sexual orientation, among other categorisational paradigms. Each of these identities is constructed through the available discourses and we are at the end the definitions of all these. For example, an unemployed Nigerian youth living in a region different from his or hers will have his or her identity constructed by the raw materials of ethnic politics, Federal Character, linguistic barriers and even gender. Moreover, we are perhaps familiar with how the discourse of age is conceptualised in different cultural scripts. In certain discourses, old age is associated with memory loss, absence of physicality and an absence of development. The same old age, in another cultural script, tells of wisdom, serenity, grace and respect. Context is extremely important here, for the same linguistic form may have very different meanings and functions in different communicative environments. Illuminating the significance of context in meaning explication, Gee (2005, p. 101) argues, "Language then always simultaneously reflects and constructs the context in which it is used". Similarly, different identities are constructed in different discursive encounters. The Nigerian context, therefore, presents us with a different view of national identity construction. This critical perspective to identity discourse is one of the core features of critical discourse analysis.

Analytic Framework

In the preceding section, I argued in support of critically engaging texts, so as to unearth their hidden meanings. It is against this backdrop that I anchor my discussion of Nigeria's identity on the principles of critical discourse analysis, popularly known as CDA. I do not focus on the various approaches of doing CDA; rather, I pay strict attention on the core features of CDA

that are shared by the prominent proponents of the critical discourse paradigm. CDA, as an approach in discourse accounts for the micro and the macro levels of texts analysis. The micro level encompasses linguistic features such as word choice and specific syntactic structure while the macro level is concerned with the function(s) of these linguistic features and how they project ideological positions in texts.

CDA, for Wodak (1996), is an approach to discourse analysis that highlights the functionally linguistic and discursive nature of social relations of ideology in contemporary societies. The core of CDA is what Wodak and Meyer (2008) describe as the critical impetus. Critical impetus sheds light on the interconnectedness of things. It is conjectured that within every form of discourse is embedded meanings and beliefs that do not overtly manifest themselves and can only be revealed by the process of critical enquiry. The need to pay attention to the interconnectedness of things within the framework of CDA is fed by a far more fundamental and wholly-accepted assumption: that language, which finds expression in discourse, is basically a social practice. This essential postulation functions as the premise for arguing that the social norms, beliefs and conventions of a given social structure shape the language in use and as such, the language in use cannot but reflect and express the beliefs, norms and conventions of that socio-cultural context and structure.

The above position does not imply that being a social practice language is a mere mirror of social structure. Wodak and Meyer (2008) draw attention to the dialectical relationship between discourse and society. Language does not just reflect and reinforce social conventions, but it also serves as the axiom of social change and transformation. It is an approach that seeks to unravel connections between discourse practices, social practices, and social structures or cognitions, connections that may be opaque to text consumers. The implication of CDA as a framework for analysing the connection between language and identity or language and discourse is that it allows the discourse analyst to transcend a mere description of the social practice: discursive practices by providing a lens with which to examine how the identities constructed and the strategies used in constructing such identities express the synergetic relationship between social structure and language as social practice. Very important, to the extent that CDA transcends the relationship between discourse and social structure, as argued by van Dijk (2008), to evaluate general social representations of values, norms, attitudes, ideologies and knowledge, means that it is a framework suited in examining the hidden meanings that lie beneath identities that have been discursively constructed by Nigerian language users and their cultural practices. It is argued that values, norms attitudes, ideologies and knowledge constitute the building blocks of any given identity (Wodak, 2006). These, when articulated in language, will come to constitute the identity of the subject of a piece of discourse. This argument is further illustrated in the model below:

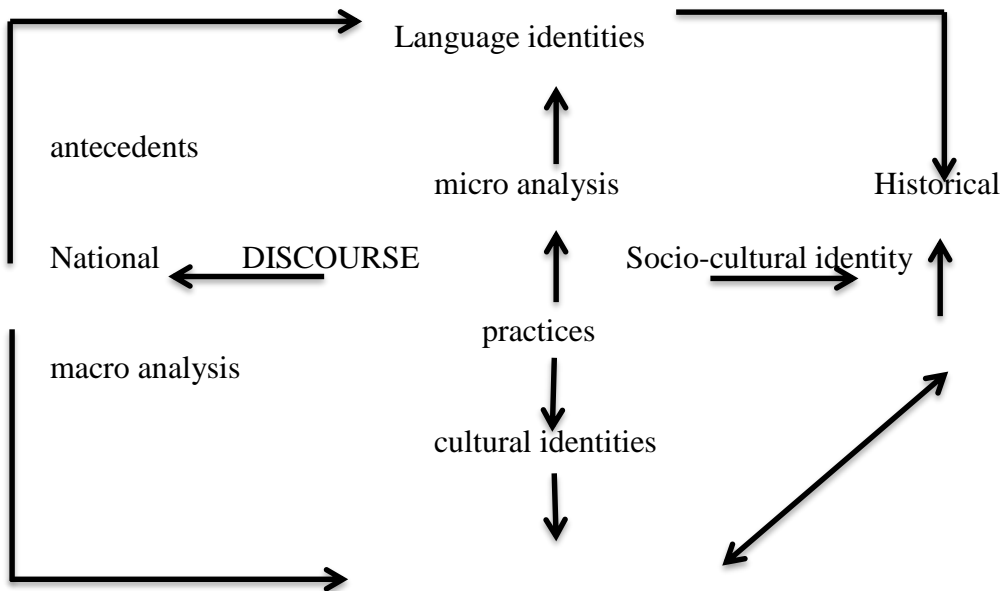


Fig. 1: A model for analysing national identity

All the discourses of language, culture, history and socio-cultural practices collaborate to formulate a national identity. Language identities such as bilingualism/multilingualism, pidgins/creoles, etc. are elemental to national identity construction. The inclusion of cultural identities, material and non-material religion, culinary, among others recognises the multiplicities of subcultures that make up a nation. The nation's history and sociocultural practices - ideologies, subjectivities - play important roles in determining the identity formulation of a nation. Another significance of CDA is that it provides an analytic model for the study of texts within situated contexts. This is tied to the generally accepted notion of discourse as social practice since social practice is action within context. Following a similar analytic, Aboh & Uduk point out that:

[T]he issue of how identity is constructed through the use of discourse is also an area of interest in CDA. CDA focuses on identity as a form of socially meaningful practice. It demonstrates how people organise repertoires of identities, through the use of language and spatial positioning-the position from which one speaks (2017, p.145).

Understanding how identity is constructed in the Nigerian context therefore, requires an understanding of the linguistic and sociocultural contexts of the Nigerian people or nation. The heterogeneity of the Nigerian nation (Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world) needs a theory that can explain the various linguistic situations that characterise her discourses. Every Nigerian, by reason of birth and existence, is bilingual, if not multilingual. Applied to the multilingual status of Nigeria and its link with identity

construction, CDA is relevant in this study in that it can account for significant elements and structures of embedded identities emanating from Nigeria's hybridised linguistic environment. Having staged the platform for understanding identity discourse, I turn attention to the construction of Nigeria's national identity.

Linguistic Identity

Despite the difficulty that is associated with the definition of a nation, constructing a national identity, throughout human evolution, has depended largely on language. Social constructionists, for example, hold the view that "language has been the marker for the "construction of a nation-state in order to be able to define 'who we are' to 'construct our national identity" (Sofu 2012, p.2). In the Nigerian multilingual and multicultural context, it is apparently difficult to talk about a homogenous language. To worsen the situation, English that is Nigeria's official language is not indigenous to her. However, Nigeria uses a variety of English known as Nigerian English, and the variety is not only increasingly becoming her official language, but also functioning as an instrument of national cohesion. "The nation state", insists Sofu (2012, p. 2), is a construction made 'sovereign' by the nationalistic discourse within its own limits of one common language, history and people". Suffice it to say that despite her linguistic limitation, Nigeria's historical antecedent is enough unifying factor. It can also become a platform for the construction of Nigerian identity. Even at that, within nations like the United States of America and the United Kingdom where English is the native language, there are still regional varieties that have lexical and accentual differentiations. However, Joseph argues that within these varieties, there are "certain patterns running through the linguistic construction of national identity worldwide, and they provide the matrix which the vicissitudes of local construction can be read and compared" (2004, p. 94). Deducible from these suppositions is the idea that shared language and history have remained invaluable materials that are deployed in the construction of national identity. Nigeria's historical colonial and postcolonial antecedents- have constructed multilingual identities for her citizenry, showcasing an evolution of a Nigerian identity.

Historically, Nigeria was a country of different nations. But colonial rule undermined the differences and merged them together into a nation. In a similar view, Garuba argues that:

[I]n Nigeria, through a curious collusion between missionaries, the colonial government and local politicians, the differences were glossed over by the creation of standard languages and the deployment of common myths of origin. Languages that were hardly mutually comprehensible were declared dialects of a common tongue, and ethnic identity became fixed on the basis of this language. Variations in identity, and a national ethno-linguistic identity was imposed (2002, p.7).

Although I do not deny the existence of local and national identities, to think of Nigeria as a disintegrating nation on account of her multiple ethnic groups is to undermine how she is using the many ethnic groups as a structure in constructing a national identity for herself. Employing a similar analytic, Udefi writes of how Nigeria's diversity is the source of her strength - unity in diversity. It is the belief of most Nigerian leaders and some scholars who have theorized the ethnic and national question in Nigeria that the factors of Nigeria's diversity should not necessarily constitute or pose any obstacles to the country's political stability, democratization and national integration (2014, p. 69).

Once more, there is no attempt to deny Nigeria's diversity and the many ethnic politically-induced crises that have continued to rock the unity of the country-there are many instances, but since it is not the concern of this study, I will not digress to accounting for those crises that have belaboured Nigeria's unity.

The multilingual character of Nigeria has hugely shaped her literary writers' use of language. It is such that her writers' use of language reflects the country's multilingualism. We see instances where writers from other ethnic groups intersperse their literary narratives with expressions from ethnic *LiwhuBetiang's Beneath the Rubble*, we find the author borrow expressions such as "wahala" languages different from (Hausa), "oya" (Yoruba), to mention theirs. For example, in kind of choices intercept with the overall macro discourse of Nigerianness in that they point a few from other ethnic languages other than his. This axiomatically to the production of a national literature that speaks on behalf of the multiethnic nationalities that make up the geopolitical entity called Nigeria. It similarly suggests that even gloss over, the Nigerian novel will reveal a plethora of linguistic instantiations that are typically Nigerian which, by and large, act as linguistic means of enacting Nigerian national identity. It is in tune with this stream of reasoning that Aboh&Igwenyi posit that "Nigerian hors succeed in leaving cultural marks that distinguish their English from other national varieties of English" (2015, pp. 62-63). But how these writers formulate a particular identity. undoubtedly, is responsive to contextual conditions. In this regard, Aboh writes, "Language is the most important instrument through which a writer organises experiences and memories" (2014, p. 176). Aboh's position has epistemological grounding and cultural validation since, through linguistic calibration of ideas, writers the world over are, in one way or the other, involved in the construction of identities.

It has been debated that, given the array of languages and the various cultures in Nigeria, constructing Nigeria's identity remains a conundrum. But then, as pointed out earlier, the emergence of world "Englishes" indicates that there is a variety of English known as Nigerian English which expresses a Nigerian national identity. Most probably, where such a linguistic modality finds accurate calibration is within the pages of the Nigerian novel. This is no longer debatable and it will be superfluous to take up the debate here since it has been variously addressed in the literature on Nigerian English. Expressions such as "419", "area boy", "flash", "oyibo", "amebo" and "suya", among many others are typical Nigerian words that are commonly used and understood by Nigerians regardless of their level of education and ethnic background. These, undoubtedly, can become a framework for the propagation of Nigeria's identity.

My insistence is that language fashions a mentality, and so it gives its users a shared identity, something that binds them in an inexplicably appealing way. Embedded in this position is the notion when we speak, people can tell where we come from. Language, then, is not only a means of communication, but also a medium that communicates our belonging to or not to a group. It propagates a feeling of belonging that no any other language, outside the language of the users, can create. In the Nigerian context, for example, the emphasis in the use of language is not basically in the grammaticality, but on the mutual meaning Nigerians share. This is why when a Nigerian tells another Nigerian that s/he is "coming" while the person is actually going, the hearer would understand that the speaker only meant that s/he would be back. A non-Nigerian might not understand what the expression means. This provides a compelling

example of the significant role of how shared sociocultural norms influence meaning explication. Culture is fundamental to national Identity construction. Hence, in the next section, I explain how certain cultural practices are peculiar to Nigeria and they are relevant indices for the construction of Nigeria's identity.

Cultural Identity

The relationship between language and culture has been frequently accounted for such that trying to establish the connection between the two concepts in this paper would rather conduce into banality. No doubt, language is part of culture and culture is part of language. The two are Intricately intertwined such that it would be difficult to separate the two without losing the Importance of both. Language allows its users to express notions that are specifically known to them. It is therefore easy to think of culture as a means of accessing language and language as a way of accessing a culture.

At this point, I can posit that Nigerians use of language, like other people of the world, is often a reflection of their cultural practices. For example, if a Nigerian tells his/her friend that she is going for "knocking on the door" or "introduction", the listener would definitely understand that the speaker is "describing the traditional Nigerian practice where an intending groom formally meets his bride-to-be's family, extended family and well-wishers" (Aboh 2014, p. 177). The underlying notion of Aboh's opinion is the fact that language articulates ideas which emanate from the socio-cultural and interpersonal transactions that the linguistic environment creates as well as permits. Arguably, the intersection between the use of Nigerian English expressions and Nigerian cultural practices can culminate into the articulation of a Nigerian identity. The practice of "introduction", for instance, has spread to virtually every part of Nigeria, making it a national culture.

It is very important at this point to note that identity is not all about language; there are diverse means by which the identity of a people could be expressed. Ways of dressing can express the identity of a nation, but the naming of that national dress culture is a linguistic exercise. Items such as "Ankara", "agbada", "asoabi" and "danshikiti", among several others, are clothes that are commonly used in Nigeria which are on their own right emblematic accounts of Nigeria's cultural identity. Despite the fact that the above mentioned are expressions that belong to different ethnic groups, wearing these clothes for some Nigerians is an enunciation of their cultural identity. One of Nigeria's prominent novelists, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is always seen in Nigerian attires. For her, Nigerian clothes are a symbol of her Nigerianness. In fact, her "WearNigeria" campaign is an effort targeted at projecting Nigeria's material culture. Ideologically embedded in her "WearNigeria" is the notion that culture is also pivotal to national identity construction.

Another example will suffice. If a Nigerian tells another Nigerian that "I am wearing native to work today". The listener will know that the speaker is referring to non-Western kind of clothes, some fashion that is Nigerian, a kind of dressing that embodies his or her Nigerianness. The University of Ibadan allows the use of indigenous wears during doctoral defence. This choice has a critical axiom: it has all the trappings of national identity construction, on the one hand, and it critically symptomises the deconstruction of colonial supremacy, on the other hand. When I was in Kampala late 2017, my host invited me to her cousin's wedding ceremony. She, my host, asked if I came with my Nigerian attire. Hidden in her question is the ideology that Nigerians have a way of dressing by which they are known.

Besides, her suggestion for me to wear something Nigerian does not only identify me as a Nigerian, but metadiscursively differentiates me from Ugandans. Her reference to Nigerian at is in itself discursively loaded because it resonates perfectly well with what she knows Nigeria's dress culture, not Ghanaians, for example. Perhaps one can see national identification in action in other words, cultural identity is an important index for the construction of national identity. It is easier for people who share the same or similar culture exist. This is basically informed by the shared cultural mindset (Block, 2007). In corollary, citizens of a country with different cultures find it somewhat difficult to co-habit. For Nigeria, it can hardly be said that she has a uniform culture. Yet, as it is with the multiple languages and shared linguistic commonalities. Nigeria's diverse cultures meet at an Inexplicable layer of oneness-the dress culture is a perfect example of this cultural oneness.

There was a viral video clip on Facebook where a girl was seen beating her mother while other passengers did nothing about it, I was alarmed, beyond the description of words, that no one in the bus could reprimand the girl. Such an act, in Nigeria, is a taboo! My perception of the dastardly act resonated perfectly well with almost every Nigerian and other Africans who made comments about the video. The commenters' opinion was that if that had happened in Nigeria, such a girl would never go unbeaten by a passenger who is not related to the girl in anyway. This is because in Nigerian a child cannot look an adult in the eye, not to even think of beating a mother. In fact, owing to the number of years Nigeria has existed as a nation, the different subcultures are simmering into one another. This is why Nigerians can point to a non-Nigerian behaviour, that is, behaviour that does not align with the cultural pattern of the Nigerian people. It is along this dialectics that waThiong' O explains how "Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race" (1986, p. 15). Thus, national identity describes a sense of belonging to a people of a nation.

Food is also an aspect of Nigeria's cultural identity. Although there are diverse food items that are eaten in the different regions of Nigeria, there are certain food items that are commonly shared by Nigerians. The most popular of the food frequently eaten by Nigerians is "akara" (beans cake) and another is "garri" (flakes processed from cassava). Of utmost importance, Nigeria expresses a culture where food is eaten using bare hands. This is unlike the Western culture where food is eaten using cutleries. Beyond cultural alignments, national identity construction focuses on broader principles such as religion, language and shared history these are constitutive materials for the construction of national identity. It is in line with these thoughts that Petersen writes that

Identifying processes elastic, fluid, and debated. Overall, identity becomes part of the social imaginary through the classifications that are being made. Power structures and audience assumptions limit and shape how identities are constructed and received (2016, p.120). Since I follow the critical discourse analytic approach to identity: "elastic, fluid, and debated", a Nigerian identity can be formulated despite her cultural and linguistic diversities. The national emblem: "Unity in Diversity" symptomises Nigeria's desire for nationalistic oneness,

Conclusion

I set out to account for the linguistic and cultural construction of a Nigerian identity. Drawing examples from both literary and non-literary situations, I surmise that despite Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural situations, Nigerians share similar linguistic and cultural

attributes which can function as starting points for the construction of Nigeria's identity, covertly, Nigerianness or demonstrating a belonging to Nigeria is premised or understood from linguistic similarities which Nigerians share as a people. Nigerian novelists' representation of this linguistic modality of "oneness" is a categorical construction of a national identity; this is despite the multiple ethnic groups and their sharp cultural and linguistic contradistinctions.

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