

Identity Construction among Hausa Traders in the South-South, South-East and South-West Zones of Nigeria

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Abstract

Identity is a seductive concept. It can easily foster ‘homuncular regression’ in our thinking in that we are easily at risk of reifying identity as an explanans (or independent variable). The aim of the study is to investigate how Hausa native speakers living in the southern part of Nigeria construct their identity and how, consequently, their identity can be preserved. In addition, the study focuses on identifying and describing some of the linguistic elements Hausa native speakers use when interacting among themselves; and on bringing forth some of the morphological staging and linguistic styles. It is against this background that the paper is anchored on the following theoretical frameworks: Social Identity Theory (Tafel & Turner, 2017); Cultural Hybridization Theory (Homi Bhabha, 1994), which helps to analyse how Hausa traders blend Hausa tradition with traditions of the host cultures, thereby creating hybrid identities; and ethno-linguistic identity theory (Giles & Johnson, 1987), which sees language as principal indicator of click or group membership and social identity. The study adopts a mixed-method technique, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches while questionnaire, observation and interviews were employed as data collection instruments. The target population comprised of forty (40) selected respondents. The random sampling technique was used. The research found that Hausa native speakers communicate among themselves via their native language, as they came from the same linguistic and cultural background, which is different from that of the host community. Therefore, the need to construct new identities is inevitable in their business fronts to enable them contain daily difficulties they may encounter. Moreover, it is necessary to maintain identities through language use and cultural practices as most of them participate in community meetings and socio-cultural festivals.

Keywords: identity, construction, native, traders, host community

INTRODUCTION

The Hausa people are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. Known for their strong trading tradition; migration has long been a defining feature of Hausa socio-economic life, with traders moving across Nigeria and West Africa to establish commercial networks. In Nigeria, for instance, Hausa traders operate in the South-South, South-East, and South-West zones of the country. They operate in major markets such as Alaba (Lagos), Onitsha market (Anambra), and Oil mill market (Port Harcourt) and live far from their homeland. These traders face complex social and cultural dynamics. They must balance preserving their Hausa Muslim identity with integrating into local societies that differ in language, religion and customs. Identity construction, therefore, becomes both a strategy for survival and means of social belonging. Therefore, how can *“identity”* be constructed from the micro-ethnolinguistic identities of various tribes in a pluralistic society? Is it possible for one to identify another member with whom he shares language affinity? Mostly, people the world over use their language for home and official interactions; this is true also in Nigeria. Most other tribes show a high degree of respect for their languages and this is no exception to Hausa people.

Identity is not just a fashionable commodity that people strive to have or think they have to have; it is also intuitively very appealing as an explanatory concept. The notion of identity as a social and psychological concept is needed to improve our understanding of the complexities and regularities of human experience and behaviour. While there is extensive literature on Hausa migration and trade, less attention has been paid to how Hausa traders construct and negotiate their identities in southern Nigeria’s multi-ethnic context. Questions remain unanswered about how they maintain cultural continuity, what aspect of Hausa identity they adapt or transform, and how interactions, transactions with host communities influence their self-perception. Understanding this identity process is essential to grasping inter-ethnic coexistence, cultural hybridization, and social cohesion in Nigeria. Therefore, the problem of this study is premised on the issue of how the Hausa traders construct identity in other regions where they are trading with people of diverse linguistic and cultural background. The Hausa people are one of the three major ethnics groups in Nigeria and found in other regions of the country. Being very enterprising in nature, like the Igbos, the Hausas, because of their nature and affluence in trading, usually live away from their geographical extraction, with the resultant effect of building, creating and constructing new identities or retaining old ones.

Research Questions

1. How do Hausa traders define, construct and express their identities in non-Hausa speaking regions of Nigeria?
2. What linguistic, religious, and cultural strategies do they employ to maintain their Hausa identity?

Literature Review

Cultural and Ethnic Construction of Identities

One basic feature that differentiates human species from other creatures is their ability to construct, amass, preserve and transmit cultural identities via linguistic codes that serve as vehicles for transmitting the society's norms, cultural beliefs and philosophies. "Identity is regarded as a highly fluid construct because it is dynamic, multifaceted and able to change" (Taquavi, 2021). Identity helps in maintaining the links with different ethnic groups and their culture.

Ashmore et. al (2022:34) have observed that "Ethnology is concerned with total identification of individuals with a particular ethnic group." However, ethnic identification has been investigated in terms of its relationship with motivational principles. The present study considers the usefulness of ethnic identity, and how it is constructed as well as the process of inclusion and exclusion as members of the ethnic group. Abrams et. al (1986:317–334) states that, "like any aspect of the self, ethnic identity is believed to comprise of dynamic social product". It enables the identity as a paradigm that could provide an avenue for one to predict the outcome of ethnic identification for self-concept, which is understood to consist of dynamic social product.

From Abrams et. al's view point, the social product of individual help to generate and maintain specific pattern of ethnic construction of identity within the context of multiple identities. Likewise, social anthropologists view ethnicity as the outcome of a relational, interactive social process. In view of this, ethnic groups usually have a limit of contact with each other and they must have the impression of each other as being culturally distinct from themselves. Allport (2001: 36–56) posits that "ethnicity is seen as an aspect of a relationship between two or more groups that view themselves as being culturally distinct. Similarly, ethnic identity arises when distinctions are made socially significant". In ethnic minority, identity may compel the ethnic group to reveal the group that they do not belong to in order to clarify

their ethnic identity. In other words, group members define whom they really are in order to know who others are, which reveals the significance of the relational self in ethnic identity construction.

This approach can be adequate as belonging to an ethnic group allow individuals to partake in the activities of trust that connect group representative to show the advantages of their ethnicity and to claim positive valuations that are associated with it. A cursory look at the saying above regarding ethnic identity suggests that belonging to a group is part of one's thinking perception, feelings and behaviour that is due to ethnic group membership as well as identification. In the same view, Vanderwerf & Wan (2009) regard ethnicity as a sense of solidarity shared between people who are related through real or fictive kinship that sees themselves as distinct from others. It is interesting to note that, from this perspective, the conceptualization of ethnic identity is perceived as a social construct or practice that gained responses from existing characteristics of cultural value that are unique to a particular group, which also distinguishes them from other groups.

On the contrary, Ellemers (2012) states the argument lies in the fact that ethnicity is based on a fabricated belief about the pedigree facts not the genealogical facts themselves; as such, the belief can often be based on historically inaccurate beliefs. Ethnicity exists as a socially constructed category that depends on belief. Ethnic existence depends on belief about its existence. Here, the notion presupposes "social nature or contractedness of ethnicity, which in turn constitutes a presumed identity and a belief in common decent (Ellemers et.al. 2012:45). Through social negotiation, ethnic demarcation lines are important in the sense that they make an important core of people's sociolinguistics realities while ethnicity itself is not in existence from the beginning of time rather it is often perceived as such by people who claim to have the same ethnic identity.

Ethnicity is a distinguished grouping of people who for historical reasons are seen as distinctive by themselves and by others on the basis of origin and other cultural makers (Hall 2002:128). However, ethnicity is based on mystical belief about genealogical factors and not the genealogical facts themselves (Harris, 2000).

Inglehart et. al. (2000) "consider identity, particularly ethnic identity, as a mental representation that is socially constructed using signs with associated meaning". Therefore, ethnic identity could be regarded as a social construct or person's identification with a segment of a large society whose membership is thought by themselves or others to have a common origin,

culture and value (Jackson 2000: 120- 135). What can be deduced here is that ethnic identity is often perceived as a frame by which individuals identify with those whom they have common bond with due to similarities in tradition, behaviour, value and belief system either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, ethnic identity construction consists of individual movement, value, behaviour, language, belief and tradition. It provides a conceptual understanding among individuals negotiating their own culture and that of others.

Sociolinguistic Factors Influencing How People Speak

There are several definitions of sociolinguistics by linguists. Recently, sociolinguistics has become so important that people are conscious of the roles language play not only as means of communication but also as a creator of social identity. Sociolinguistics, as a field of study, is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. In other words, it studies the relationship between language and society; despite that, the society is over and above the people who made the society and the language they use. This shows that individuals speak in different ways in diverse social settings.

Un-Nisa (2019) defines sociolinguistics as the branch of linguistics that deals with the study of language in connection with the society. This implies that language and society have something in common, as language cannot be without a society. Sociolinguistics gives more insight on the nature of language and the society. Yasemin (2013) posits that sociolinguistics is the science that examines the purpose and roles of language and society. It tries to explain reasons why language differs in different context and how people speak with others in different settings. Similarly, Munawaroh (2023) cited Holmes (2013) that sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. He stated that sociolinguistics is interested in examining why people speak differently in different social settings. He further stated that it deals with identifying the social functions of language and the manner it is used to pass social meaning. Munawaroh (2023) as cited in Augustina & Chaer (2010), said they observed that sociolinguistics is the study of the features of language varieties, the distinctive nature of their functions and the features of their speakers as these three consistently interact, change one another within a speech community.

From the above it can be concluded that sociolinguistics is a discipline and the branch of linguistics that makes a link between sociology and linguistics. It can also be seen as a branch of sociology and as a concept that deals with how language use is a determinant of a given societal linguistics condition.

For the purpose of this present study, it focuses on how people use language and how the society responds to it. Hudson (1996) argued that sociolinguistics shows how some groups in a particular society are marked by certain social variables, such as gender, religion, status and level of education, used to categorize individual social class.

Theoretical framework

The study is anchored on three frameworks: Tafel & Turner Social Identity Theory (2017), which explains how individuals define themselves through group membership and social comparison; Homi Bhabha (1994) Cultural Hybridization Theory, which help to analyse how Hausa traders blend Hausa traditions with host cultures, creating hybrid identities; and Giles & Johnson (1987) framework of ethno-linguistic identity theory, which focuses on language as a major marker of group membership and social identity. The theory states that individuals are motivated to maintain a positive social identity derived from membership of a particular ethno-linguistics group. Giles & Johnson (ibid) also remarked that the social psychological approach to language and inter-ethnic behaviour allows us to predict who in an ethnic group uses which language strategy. This model builds on the premise that, as active meaning seekers, people engage in self-interpretation, which refers to the social-cognitive process whereby people give coherence and meaning to their own experiences, including their relations with the physical and social environment. Through self-interpretation, people achieve an understanding of themselves or, in other words, an identity, which in turn influences their subsequent perception and behaviour. The central working assumption of the model is that self-interpretation involves a varying number of self-aspects.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs quantitative and qualitative approaches to the analysis of the data obtained from the respondents. The data collected via survey of the personal experience of respondents both individually and collectively in terms of identity construction in South-South, Sout-East, and South-West zones of Nigeria, all of which are multi-ethnic and multilingual. The target population for the study was determined using Krejcie & Morgan (2006) statistical procedure for determining population and sample in research activities. Ten (10) respondents trading in the South-South, ten (10) in the South-West and ten (10) in the South-East. Hausa speaking people (indigenous) were selected from four regions, which gives a total of (40) respondents representing the population. The objective is to examine how the Hausa language can be well kept up among traders residing in

aforementioned regions. Essentially, native language preservation is an essential aspect of community membership. Therefore, all the forty respondents were sampled for the analysis.

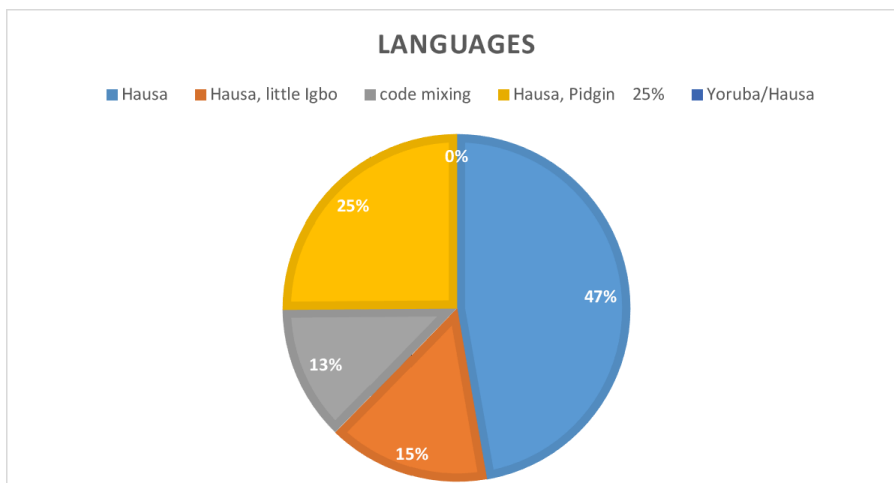
Data Analysis

Table 1. Which language do you speak in transaction with Igbo Friends/neighbours traders who are from same/different communities?

Languages	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hausa,	19	47.5%
Hausa little of Igbo	6	15%
Code mixing Hausa, pidgin, English and sometimes few words of the language of immediate environment	5	12.5%
Hausa and Pidgin English	10	25%
Yoruba and Hausa	-	-
Total	40	100%

Table 1 reveals that majority of the respondents speak Hausa in transaction with Igbo people from diverse communities, despite regional dialectal differences. Regardless of the major differences in terms of intelligibility and words count. Fluency level of the people with forty-seven percent (47%), while 12.5% were code-mixing Hausa, pidgin, English and sometimes few words of the language of immediate environment. 10 respondents (25%) speak Hausa and Pidgin English in transactions, and 6 respondents (15%) use Hausa with a combination of little of Igbo language to achieve business transaction. The chart below shows the percentage of usage.

pie chart 1



Which of these languages do you speak at Onitsha Market and other markets for trading and other business purposes?

Table 2.

Languages	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hausa and Pidgin,	20	50%
Hausa and little elements of Igbo language (code mixed)	8	20%
Hausa	7	17.5%
Igbo	5	12.5%
Total	40	100%

Table 2 provides information concerning preferred language spoken during transaction activities in Onitsha market, which is an Igbo-based community. The Hausa respondents speak Hausa mostly during most of their business dealings coupled with some Pidgin English in the form of code mixing because of environmental influence and discourse continuity to aid clarity with those that could not comprehend 20-30% of what is said. One of the wonders lies in the fact that at Onitsha market sometimes you are transacting business with some people who can neither understand Hausa nor Pidgin English, not even a little, as they speak only Igbo language. In this case, alternating between Hausa language and a little of Igbo would not help; usually, a translator, an Igbo who understands Hausa or pidginised Hausa is required.

Which language do you prefer to speak with buyers from other tribes in your business in the South-West zone?

Table 3.

Languages	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hausa	36	90%
Hausa and Yoruba	3	7.5%
Purely Yoruba	1	2.5%
Total	40	100%

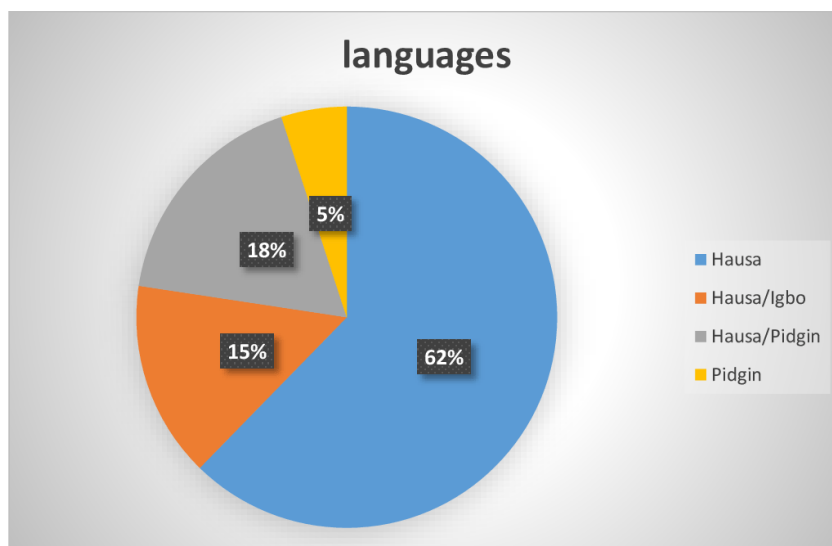
From the table above, information reveals that in the South West zone the respondents speak Hausa most times in general dealings as most of the Yoruba people do speak Hausa with some degree of fluency, intelligibility and clarity. Therefore, 90% is achieved, followed by use of two codes Hausa and Yoruba in some cases by alternating either code mixing or switching in some cases intelligibility hindered. This means at any given situation Hausas

use, identify, maintain and construct their identity by constant preservation of their culture wherever and whichever situation, no matter the geographical zones and tribes they mingle with. Ninety percent (90%) achieved as per the regular and frequency of usage.

Which language do you prefer to speak with Igbo co-traders?

Table 4.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hausa Language	25	62.5%
Hausa /Igbo Language	6	15%
Hausa/Pidgin English	7	17.5%
Pidgin	2	5%
Total	40	100%



During business transactions, do you prefer the languages of the immediate environment over yours?

Table 5

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not sure	-	-
Not at all	40	100%
Total	40	100%

Table 5 shows that the respondents consider no language superior to their mother tongue (Hausa). However, all are of equal capacity and importance in terms of communication, socialisation, cultural preservation and business.

How often do you speak languages of your business partners out there?

Table 6

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Occasionally	23	57.5%
Regularly	15	37.5%
Rarely	2	5%
Not at all	-	-
Total	40	100%

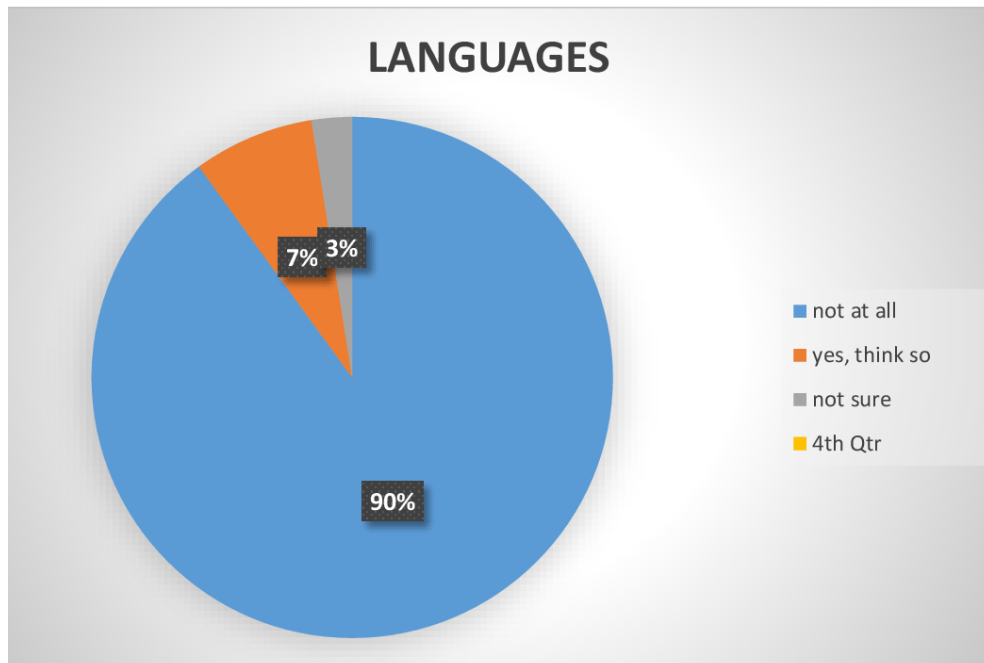
Table 6 provides information on when and how often the Hausa traders living in southern Nigeria speak the languages of their business associates; occasional usage equals 57.5%, rare usage 37.5% equals 15 and regularly equals 37.5 with 15 level of frequency.

Has the level of your Hausa language proficiency changed as a result of living among people of different linguistic background?

Table 7:

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not at all	36	90%
Yes, think so	3	7.5%
Not sure	1	2.5%
Total	40	100%

The above table shows that majority think that their language proficiency has not changed. Ninety percent of the respondents believe that their proficiency level remains the same despite living in a linguistically different environment; 7.5% believe there might be some element of change but not so sure of the proficiency change; while 2.5% said they were not sure if anything had changed.



What are the implications of using your mother tongue out there?

Table 8

S/N	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1.	There is some sense of pride in regular use of my language	15	37.5%
2.	Assists in cultural preservation	10	25%
3.	Serves as a means of identification, sense of belonging, home feeling among brothers	12	30%
4.	To prevent the feeling of being away from home	3	7.5%
	Total	40	100%

Table above shows that majority of the respondents believe that the implication of using Hausa language often would guard against loss of language proficiency.

Findings

The study, from the perspectives discussed, explored the position of Hausa language usage and its identity among the traders in the geographical zones. The research avers that most of the Hausa traders from the study population are obviously proud of their ethnic background but still construct new identities in their business-fronts to enable them transact, interact and serve

their customers well. Consequently, it is noted that they strive to retain their cultural identities through language use and other traditional practices.

It was established that the Hausa traders do use their native language with other Hausa speakers from different Hausa states. It was also found out that Hausa people have stronger identity and therefore speak more of Hausa to their business partners from different language background. By implication, it is observed that native language preservation is an essential aspect of community membership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research shows that indigenous language is the major tool that individuals could utilize to assess the world and communicate for social cohesion. Language is the strength of its speakers as well as important tool for identity preservation. Through language use, individuals are able to reveal or index their identity and proudly self-identify with the socio cultural group they belong to and this is significant for their wellbeing. Similarly, communication as noted solely depends on the language a person chose to interact within a particular setting since identity is neither fixed nor static but fluid. In this sense, all language represents a specific social group and it is the duty of such group to preserve and promote their cultural heritage for the future generation. Largely, the development of any society's political, social and economic growth is depends on the language use of such society. This implies that a nation is well developed by the manner in which the language that best depict its ideology is utilized. Such language operates as a means of communication for the people.

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