

Identity and (Dis)agreement in Congo–Brazzaville Political Discourse on Facebook



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1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is one transversal research concept that has attracted researchers from a myriad of disciplines, including social psychology, sociolinguistics, literature, linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis, pragmatics among many others (Kroskrity 2000; Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009; Andersson 2022). For example, social psychologists have enhanced our understanding of the patterns of individual prejudices and discrimination as well as the motivational sequences of interpersonal interaction (Tajefel and Turner 1979; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou 2017; Tsoumou 2020, 2022). Sociolinguistics has shed light upon the ways in which such concepts as ‘a language’ and ‘a group or community’ come into being through the acts of identity which people perform (Grant and Macleod 2016). Both linguists and anthropologists recognize the importance of pronouns in anchoring language to specific speakers in specific contexts and in signaling the reciprocal changes in the roles of interactants through their performance of, and engagement in communicative acts (De Fina et al., 2006). Pragmatic research on the interplay between humor and identity construction show that language users can index their collective and cultural identities through the awareness they illustrate of socially accepted and appropriate behaviors (Sinkeviciute 2019). With respect to identity (co-)construction, the consensus is that impoliteness, for example, can play a role in the way interactants negotiate the notion of face (Malthus, 2019), and through this negotiation, they may tend to position themselves with respect to others (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou 2017; Andersson 2021). In other words, impoliteness plays a role in shaping group tensions and collective/individual dynamics (Perelmutter 2018; Garcés-conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch 2018, 2019). In globalized contexts, for example, the emphasis has been on the crucial role of top-down homogeny and bottom-up differentiations in language practices, language ideologies, and identities, analysing the in-grouping/out-grouping dynamics in the selection of language to cause offense and the (re)affirmation of social identity (Perelmutter 2018; Garcés-conejos Blitvich 2018). However, despite the growing research on identity, the relationship between (dis)agreement and identity in online political debates in multilingual context such Congo-Brazzaville has received scant attention, even though these phenomena are common discursive practices in polarizing interactions (Locher and Sebastian 2006). This chapter thus qualitatively examines the link between (dis)agreement and identity in politically oriented Facebook interactions in Congo-Brazzaville, a sociolinguistic environment where more than sixty languages (i.e., French, Kituba, Lingala and ethnic languages such as Mbochi) are regularly spoken (Tsoumou 2020). The study intends to explore how (dis)agreements become forms of affirmation and denial in which the expression of judgment or opinion - rather than the assertion of fact - is not just involved, but becomes a way to (dis)claim a certain form of identity. In this paper, it is argued that (dis)agreement and identity are strongly linked in a way that (dis)agreements can serve as signals of political and sociocultural identities. If a person A (dis)agrees with a person B,

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the turn A takes in his/her expression of such a (dis)agreement will index A's true self as opposed to others. In other words, a person A will likely disagree with a person B who shares an opposite political view. In this respect, the paper intends to answer the following question,

- What forms of identities are (re)constructed through (dis)agreement in this politically and linguistically polarized context?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section two gives some background. Section three provides the focus of the study. Section 4 analyzes the data and provides solutions and recommendations. Section 5 discusses findings and set future research directions and the last section concludes the chapter.

2. BACKGROUND

The scope of scholarship research on identity is broad; and identity is not easy to define, explain or explore. Identity is a process through which the users construct and negotiate the meaning of the interaction by means of (a) discourse positioning (b) exploitation of languages to cause offense and (c) the (re)affirmation of community membership, which arises from the collective use and understanding of the languages of interaction. In other words, in this paper identity refers to the way the users self reveal through the positions they take in the interaction, their language choice as well as their awareness of the multilingual nature of the interaction, which then (re)affirms their membership to the same linguistic community (Tsoumou 2023, forthcoming). Identity is, in other words, what characterizes a person or a thing. In this vein, scholars concur over the argument that identity is not a given entity, static property, or a finished project; instead, it is a practical accomplishment that is constructed – and even deconstructed in the “everyday flow of verbal interaction (Georgakopoulou 2006). In the view of this exigency, scholars are increasingly attempting to offer an inclusive perspective on identity – that is, one that focuses on both the details of language and the workings of culture and society which can be explained within discourse analysis and sociolinguistic mainstreams (De Fina et al. 2006; Bucholt and Hall 2005). In this perspective, De Fina et al, (2006, 2) defines identity as “a process that (1) takes place in concrete and specific interactional occasions, (2) yields constellations of identities instead of individual, monolithic constructs, (3) does not simply emanate from the individual, but results from processes of negotiation, and (4) entails discursive work”. In this way, identity, more than a given product, is a process that is constantly (re)negotiated within an interaction (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013, Andersson 2022). In other words, the focus has shifted from the potential interrelationship between sociolinguistic variables onto the exploration of how identities are invoked and enacted through the deployment of linguistic resources (Bauman 2000). As Grand and Macleod (2016, 53) point out, “attention has moved away from isolated linguistic variables onto discursive practices, and from homogeneity to variability”. Perhaps the commonly shared cross disciplinary understanding of identity is that it is not a fixed or static phenomenon, but it is relational to the interaction and the interactants through the different turns and attributions they take in the interaction (Georgakopoulou 2006). Bucholt and Hall (2005, 586) argue that “identity does not emerge at a single analytic level – whether vowel quality, turn shape, code choice, or ideological structure – but operates at multiple levels simultaneously”. In other words, language users may carry at once various types of identities through the use of particular linguistic elements or simply through language choice as a way to index affiliations with various identities (Sinkeviciute 2019).

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