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## **Identity and Code Switching among Liberian Refugees in Oru Camp, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

In the course of interaction, bilinguals usually alternate between languages in order to project different faces. This study aims at examining the manifestations of identity among Liberian refugees in Oru camp, Nigeria, through code-switching. This is with a view to delineating the motivations behind the phenomenon coupled with the trajectories of the switches in relation to their indigenous languages, Yoruba (the host community language), Pidgin, and English. The study employed Ethno-linguistic Identity Theory as guide and adopted participant observation to elicit data from 20 adult respondents. The result revealed that code switching among the respondents was triggered by greetings, announcements, quotations, and proverbs. The trajectories of the switches were mainly from English to indigenous languages and Pidgin to indigenous languages. However, the respondents also manifested momentary identities with Yoruba through emblematic code switching. Liberian refugees in Oru camp were bilinguals who manifested multiple linguistic identities which indicated their psychological membership of multiple spheres and groups in the camp. However, the pattern or trajectory of their code switching revealed that they identified more with English and Pidgin, and less with their indigenous languages, and least with Yoruba, the language of the host community. In this way, they underlined their preference for modern and

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metropolitan identity over ethnic identity. The paper recommends that refugees should identify more with their indigenous languages and the host community language for reasons of language vitality, inclusion, and the benefits of diversity.

**Keywords:** refugees; linguistic identity; code switching; ethno-linguistics; Nigeria.

### **1. Introduction**

This study is an investigation of the place of language in the construction of multifarious identities among Liberian refugees in Oru refugee camp, Ogun State Nigeria. It is acknowledged that refugees are confronted with numerous challenges, ranging from food, healthcare, shelter, resettlement, etc. However, this study is specifically on the language and identity question in the experience of refugees. The reason for opting to study the language proposition, among all other inconveniences encountered by refugees is because language is central in the lives of individuals as a veritable means of identification and solidarity within and across cultures (Kim, 2001; Berry, 2008). However, refugees who live among a different ethno linguistic group often find themselves in a cultural dilemma. According to Albrecht (2001) life as a refugee is problematic as it adversely affects one's sense of identity. Apart from material challenges, language barriers also frequently pose a difficulty as refugees struggle with issues of identity and belonging in a completely different ethno-linguistic environment (UNHCR 2008). They are usually presented with a bouquet of linguistic alternatives (their indigenous language, the language of the host community, and other foreign languages) which often persuade them to re-negotiate their identities.

In this study, attention is focused on how respondents manifested various identities in the camp in the course of interaction. Interaction, in this instance is limited to verbal exchanges between or among participants. Franceschini (1998 cited in Guerini 2005) defines interaction as a hyperonym designating all the verbal activities normally carried out by human beings; one of these activities is

conversation; that is, face-to-face interaction taking place simultaneously in the (physical) presence of all the participants. Taylor (1994) posits that it is not just language but also discourse which is important in the formation and shaping of identity, which arises out of interaction. The purpose of interaction, among other things, is to give and receive information and also to project a face or image; to show other participants who you are and how you want to be seen. Code-switching is examined in this study as a conversation device through which identity is constructed. Through the system of code-switching, speakers identify with a culture or cultures and by this means construct their own identities, and/or other identities.

### **1.1. Objectives**

The general objective of this study is to investigate code-switching as a strategy adopted by Liberian refugees in Oru camp as they manifest different identities and faces. Specifically, the study aims at evaluating the motivations for code-switching among the sampled participants by examining the pattern and trajectories of the code-switching and their implications for identity projection.

### **1.2. Identity and Code-Switching**

Code-switching is the linguistic device employed by bilinguals, to express themselves in different linguistic codes given different situations (Holmes 2008; Grosjean 1982). Myers-Scotton (1993, p.4) views the concept as “the selection by bilinguals or multi-linguals of forms from an embedded language (or languages) in utterances of a matrix language during the same conversation.” In this configuration, the matrix language represents the main or base language, while the embedded language is the secondary language, which plays a lesser role. In his typology of bilinguals, Olaoye (1998, p.117) explains that a bicultural coordinate bilingual uses a second language for reasons of integration and, when he changes to another language, sees himself as changing his personality or becoming ‘a different person’. Haugen (1982, p. 282, cited in Korth, 2005) posits that language choice is “often a significant indication of the group with which one wishes to

identify”. Korth (2005) stresses this tendency among bilinguals to identify with both groups whose languages they speak and by so doing emphasise a mixed or heterogeneous identity through the use of a mixed code or code-switching.

Myers-Scotton (1993) makes a distinction between marked and unmarked code switching. Marked code-switching involves languages that are not expected (in the course of a conversation) in a setting. For instance, an educated civil servant switching to English during a conversation (in the local language) with a village kin that has little or no facility in English is unexpected; that is, not proper for that conversation. The civil servant may choose this option for the purpose of enhancing the social difference between the two interlocutors and to underscore his status. On the contrary, unmarked code-switching involves languages that are expected; in the course of a conversation, in a setting. In this case, if the civil servant switches to a pidgin, understood by the village kin, it is expected, that is, proper for that conversation. Essentially, marked code-switching is mainly employed to delineate differences, and show power and status, while unmarked code switching is used mainly for reasons of rhetoric.

Gibson (2004) states that code-switching could be exclusionary and inclusionary. It is exclusionary when it is employed to distance other persons (outsiders) who do not belong to the same culture. It is inclusionary when it helps to accommodate other persons who do not belong to the same culture.

### **1.3. Ethno-linguistic Identity Theory (ELIT)**

Ethno-linguistic identity theory is a social psychological approach proposed by Giles and Johnson in 1987 as an extension of Social Identity Theory (SIT), (Oakes 2001). Giles and Johnson (1987) hold that, as people grow up, they also learn to group themselves and other people into social categories which usually use language as a marker for ethnic distinctiveness. Korth (2005) stresses that social categorization often employs language as a marker for ethnic distinctiveness. Additionally, she stresses the demand of ELIT that individuals may feel a sense of belonging to a group because they feel

that they share the same system of symbols and meanings (language) which implies an Us-feeling; and also the fact that those who identify themselves with a particular group are more likely to use the language of that group. Masaki et al (2010) posit that ELIT is one of the theories which provide explanation for the conceptual link between an individual's language use and cultural adaptation, including ethnic identity. This indicates that, as far as ELIT is concerned, language represents a core or primary aspect of an individual's social group identity and, to an extent, worldview.

One of the vital revisions made in the ELIT theory is the introduction of the concept of convergence and divergence. Convergence and divergence originated in Accommodation Theory propounded by Giles (1974). Convergence is a method whereby individuals adapt to the communication patterns of each other during interaction. On the contrary, divergence is a communicative devise used to emphasise the language of the minority group for the purpose of marking differences between the in-group and the dominant out-group (Giles and Coupland 1991). It follows that whereas convergence enhances solidarity with the out-group, divergence accentuates difference with the out-group.

## **2. Methodology**

The approach used in this study is the qualitative method. The sample for the study was taken from Oru refugee camp in Ogun State, Nigeria. The population of the sample was about 2000 going by the opinion of the leaders of the Liberian group in the camp. However, 20 young and adult respondents were purposively sampled for this study. Incidentally, only ten respondents provided data which were adjudged useful for this research. The reason for the limited number is that this is a qualitative investigation whose major concern is not numeric but an observation of spontaneous human activity. The research instrument employed to collect information in compliance with the qualitative methodology adopted is participant observation. The researcher spent a lot of time with the refugees in the camp until the two parties became familiar with each other and they no longer saw him as a stranger or

intruder. According to Krulfeld (1998), participant observation proves to be highly essential for refugee research due to the fact that refugees often do not trust researchers who usually come from stable dominant groups. Additionally, the fact that refugees are reachable, due to their peculiar circumstances, offers researchers the opportunity to relate with them in everyday life and by so doing build up trust which is necessary to obtain reliable data.

### **2.1. Analysis**

The qualitative data were analysed by means of sociolinguistic tools of observer impression. Observer impression is an analytical approach whereby an expert examines the data and subjects it to interpretation by forming an impression. Thereafter the expert, who is the researcher, reports his impression in a structured and sometimes quantitative form. The advantage of this analytical tool is that it is bereft of complications, and so its simplicity helps the appreciation of the results.

### **2.2. Language Information**

The indigenous languages identified among the sampled Liberian refugees were mainly Krahn, Bassa, and Kpelle. Other languages are English, and Pidgin. The respondents claimed an indigenous language as their first language. On the contrary, all the respondents claimed English as their second language. This is expected because English is the official language in Liberia (Ngovo, 1988). Additionally, all the respondents claimed Pidgin as one of the languages in their repertoire. This claim is understandable as Pidgin runs through the length and breadth of Anglophone West Africa (hence West Africa Pidgin English, WAPE). In addition to these, the language of the host community is Yoruba. Adebija (2004) identifies Yoruba as one of the three major languages in Nigeria, (the other two are Hausa and Igbo), owing to the population of their speakers. It is, therefore, obvious that the refugees were domiciled within one of the three dominant ethno linguistic groups in Nigeria.

### **3. Results, Analysis and Discussion**

The result of this investigation, sourced through interviews and participant observation, is as presented in the following subsections.

#### **3.1. Greetings-based Switch**

The manifestation of different identities is often triggered by factors such as greetings, in the course of a conversation. This is an instance of participant-related code-switching. Some of their occurrences are in situations where a participant needs to greet a new entrant. An instance of such incidence is presented in the following samples.

- Sample 1: (Chat between the researcher (RES) and Mummy Favour (MF) a Bassa woman)
1. RES: How Favour madam?  
*(How is Favour madam?)*
  2. MF: Favour fine–o  
*(Favour is very fine).*
  3. RES: She don grow well well  
*(she has really grown up)*
  4. MF: No be small, I thank God  
*(it is not a small thing, I thank God)*  
(A Bassa woman (BW) enters)
  5. BW: Be muien, be gwree  
*(Good morning, good afternoon)*
  6. MF: E na yii?  
*(You don come?)*  
“have you come?”

In sample 1, the switch is from Pidgin to an indigenous language, Bassa. This shift represents a transition from a metropolitan identity to an ethnic identity. In the sample above, the switch from Pidgin to Bassa is an instance of divergence, for the purpose of greeting or phatic communion, but its remote cause is to express ethnic identity and solidarity. This kind of code-switching occurs where there is an obvious change in the situation like ‘the arrival of a new person’ (Holmes 2008:35). Guerini (2005:171) proposes that ‘though in many

cases phatic expressions are actually uttered in the language of interaction, bilingual speakers may choose to give up the code employed up to that point of the conversation and mark them through the introduction of a different language, thus giving rise to a code-switching occurrence'. It should be noted that MF suspended her interaction with the researcher due to the entrance of her ethnic relation. This suspension underscores the strength of ethnic bonding and solidarity. The suspension is a subtle exercise of power by MF in that she initiated the suspension, without the consent of the other participant, and especially the fact that she suspended the talk without the courtesy of an excuse. Although, the divergence to the indigenous language in the greetings by the women is unmarked, it had the effect of distancing RES. The implication of this distancing is the drawing of a line between 'we' and 'they', and to some degree the 'distancer' openly highlighted her psychological distinctiveness. In this instance, MF diverged from a metropolitan face (Pidgin) to an ethno- linguistic face (indigenous language).

### 3.2. Announcement-based Switch

The manifestation of different identities is sometimes triggered by the need to give information to others in the course of an ongoing conversation between participants. This kind of participant related code-switching is that which involves a reference or announcement to an individual or group for the sake of conveying information due to a sudden change in a situation. This is presented in sample 2 below.

Sample 2: (A chat between the researcher (RES) and Mrs. Ledlum (LM) a Kpelle woman in a block in the camp)

1. RES: Madam, wetin de happen, this place no dey busy like Before? (*Madam, what is happening? This place is no longer very busy.*)
2. LM: Some people have lef for anoda sa. (*Some people have moved to another side.*)
3. RES: Ok even Charles my friend don move to another side of the camp? (*Alright, even my friend Charles has*



- moved to another side of the camp?)*
4. LM: Yes (*suddenly the electric bulb above lights up*)
  5. LM: (to camp mates): He-e-e! le na co! le na co!
  6. RES: Wetin you tell dem? (*What did you tell them?*)
  7. LM: I say light don come; na so we talk for our pidgin  
(*I said electricity is back, that is how we say it in our pidgin*)
  8. RES: Ok

In the sample 2, the switch is from Nigerian Pidgin to Liberian Pidgin, and the purpose is to convey information to other Liberians in the block. The unmarked code for the transmission of this news is Liberian Pidgin. LM switched to Liberian Pidgin to signal group membership, identity and solidarity with her national kin in the camp. Here, LM suspended talk with RES in order to address her national kin in their variety of pidgin which the researcher did not understand. This is a case of divergence for socio-cultural expediency. By so doing, LM drew a line between ‘we’ Liberians and ‘RES’ Nigerians, and underlined her psychological distinctiveness.

### **3.3. Quotation-based Switch**

The manifestation of different identities is sometimes occasioned by the need to make reference to an earlier utterance by another speaker in order to validate, authenticate or underline a point in the course of a conversation. An example of this code-switching pattern observed in the sample involved the quoting of a remark or utterance made by someone else in a previous conversation. This variety of code-switching is presented in sample 3.

- Sample 3: (extract of chat between RES and Mummy J (MJ), a Krahn)
1. MJ: The moment they know you are a refugee,
  2. they count you to be nothing, you are jus
  3. useless... okay my mother was sweeping one day,

4. one Yoruba man usually come to supply drink here
5. and saw my mother sweeping and say *'ah-ah, you dis*
6. *woman, you no see me? you dis refugee'*... (what, did you  
not see me woman! You refugee!) So, that is what I am  
saying,
7. They see us as nothing.

Sample 3 involves a switch from English to Nigerian Pidgin (NP). MJ directly quoted the NP based question posed to her mother by a Yoruba salesman for the purpose of authenticating her report. In switching to Nigerian Pidgin, MJ tried to reproduce the derogatory tone of the Yoruba salesman. In the process, MJ suspended the language of interaction (English), resorted to Nigerian Pidgin in the quote and later resumed the interaction in English. The suspension of English before the quotation in NP is important because it helps to highlight the quote and the insulting content which MJ wanted the researcher to note. By quoting the Yoruba salesman MJ imitated the actual voice and tone of the salesman. In so doing, MJ indexed her level of identity with the Yoruba speech style, and thus amplified the quote. Guerini (2005:175) observes that 'this kind of conversational device is especially frequent in narrative sequences, where code-switching is commonly resorted to in order to mark portions of quoted speech thereby isolating from the surrounding utterances and accentuating the different voices emerging and alternating within the narration itself'. Myers-Scotton (1993) suggests that a switching of this type exemplifies sequential unmarked code-switching. A quotation of this nature serves a referential function. In this instance, there is a shift from a cosmopolitan face to a metropolitan face.

### 3.4. Proverb-based Switch

The manifestation of other identities is sometimes effected by the need to support or strengthen a position in the course of a conversation. In a conversation, a participant may switch to a proverb in his native language for one reason or the other as the following example in sample 4 shows.

- Sample 4: (Chat between the researcher (RES) and Mrs. Sensie (SS) a Kpelle woman after a recorded interview)
1. RES: May be they (Yoruba) don't know you
  2. don't like to be called omo refugee
  3. SS: They know, they say it to make us feel ba (bad),
  4. to show us we are not importan. In Kpelle we say
  5. 'nenii kpo ?la ka nieyi faa baa, kee no a gboo ?la
  6. ima komo keni nenii nyea, ka fo nanlai paa'. It
  7. means the woman who gave her dog out to be killed
  8. but sees the dog licking her child's stool changes her
  9. mind about killing the dog.
  10. RES: Ok, that means even dogs do some good works.
  11. SS: Yes, it means that everybody is important, in one way or the other.

In sample 4, there is a switch from English to Kpelle. The purpose of switching to Kpelle to say the proverb is evidently to make the truth more explicit and undisputable. If the respondent had translated the proverb in the language of interaction (English) probably English would have tempered the strength of expression and it would not be as effective as she wanted. Saying the proverb in the indigenous tongue (Kpelle) by SS made the expression more effective. This is a case of divergence motivated by communicative and cultural expediencies. Apart from the referential function which this switch served in the interaction, the switch also signalled ethnic identity; SS used the proverb to signal identity with Kpelle. This is apparent in the tag which preceded the switch: 'in Kpelle we say ...'. The tag helped to establish a 'we' and 'they' disposition between the participants in the interaction. In this instance, the identity shift is from a cosmopolitan face to an ethno-linguistic face.

It is important to note that the trajectory of code switching has implications for identity. The pattern of code switches were mainly English-Ethnic, Pidgin-Ethnic, English-Pidgin and Pidgin-Pidgin. It is obvious that English and Pidgin were the bases of the switches

encountered in the samples; that is, the respondents switched from English/Pidgin to their indigenous languages, switched from English to Pidgin, and from Nigerian Pidgin to Liberian Pidgin. English and Pidgin represented the matrix languages in these interactions while the indigenous languages represented the embedded language. The base language, to an extent, represents the language mainly used by the respondents. In terms of identity projection, it is deemed fit that the base language represents the identity preferred by the participants. On the strength of this, it is suggested that the pattern of switching in the present study shows that the respondents preferred a modern identity, represented by English, followed by a metropolitan identity represented by Pidgin, and an ethno-linguistic identity represented by their indigenous tongues, in that order. This is also an indication that the least preferred identity is the language of the host community, Yoruba. The reason for the overwhelming preference for English is not far-fetched; English is a prestigious language with limitless instrumental capabilities. Breitborde (1988) notes two socio-cultural factors responsible for the prestige of English in Liberia. One, English is part of the set of customs associated with civilization and modernity. Two, English is prestigious due to a social structure in which the most powerful group and elite, i.e. the Americo-Liberians, were native English speakers. The preference for Pidgin is anchored on the fact that it is a language of wider communication, used mainly in the cities and thus has a high status, in terms of the image of the user. Most West Africans speak Pidgin with pride due to the fact that it gives them a city image and identity. The Liberian Pidgin English or Kreyol, and Kru Pidgin English are some of the languages identified by Wolf (2001) as a language of wider communication in Liberia. The indigenous languages of Liberia do not enjoy as much prestige as English or Pidgin. This is because they are symbolic languages mainly employed in informal or domestic settings.

### **3.5. Emblematic Code-Switching**

A particular variety of code switching through which respondents manifested other identities is termed emblematic or tag switching. In

some utterances a speaker switches to another language or variety albeit momentarily but does not continue the speech or talk in the switched language. Such switches are found either in the beginning or the end of a sentence. This is why Holmes (2008:36) labelled it emblematic or tag switching. It is a tag because they are fringe and marginal occurrences and do not constitute the main part of the sentence. This variety is mainly used by bilinguals who have a peripheral or less than passing knowledge of the tagged language. Instances of emblematic switching found in the sample are the following: *Ejòó* (please), *àbí* (as you said), *şèbí* (so), *ó yá* (come on), and *ńkó* (what about). These examples are presented in sample 5.

Sample 5: (Conversation between Mummy Favour (MF) and a young Liberian girl. (LG)

1. MF: Ha yu de?  
(*How are you?*)
2. LG: A de  
(*I am fine.*)
3. MF: *Jòó* (please) a wan sen yu na mama Ebie shop.  
*Please I want to send you to mama Ebie's shop*
4. LG: Ok.

Sample 6: (A casual exchange between Mr. Lebbie (LB), and a Liberian woman (LW) cooking in the varandah of a block).

1. LB: Mi a go eat – o, that food go sweet well well  
(*I will eat, that food will be very sweet*)
2. LW: *àbí*-o, a de we na yu  
(*yes – o, I am waiting for you*)

Sample 7: (Conversation between a Liberian buyer (LB) and a Liberian vegetables vendor (VV)

1. LB: How much for okro?  
(*How much is okro?*)
2. VV: Okro, two, ten naira  
(*Okro, I sell two for ten naira*)

3. LB: Maggi *ńkọ*?  
(*what about maggi?*)
4. VV: Two, 10 naira  
(*I sell two for ten naira*)

Sample 8: (Extract of a conversation between Mrs. Sensie (SS) a Liberian woman and her son Karina (KA))

1. SS: You have assignment?
2. KA: yes
3. SS: In what?
4. KA: In Basic drill
5. SS: Basic dri, do you know e?
6. KA: (nods)
7. SS: *ó yá* (*come on*) come and carry your bag insa (inside)

Sample 9: (Casual chat between a Liberian boy (BO) and a baby (BA))

1. BO: *Sèbí*, your name na Marvellous.  
(*so, your name is Marvellous*)
- BA: (giggles)
- BO: *Sèbí* your name na marvelous.  
(*So, your name is Marvellous*).

The tags, *jọ́ọ́*, *àbí*, *ó yá* and *sèbí* occurred at the beginning of the expressions while the tag *ńkọ* occurred at the end of the sentence. In sample 5, the initial tag *jọ́ọ́* was used as a plea by MF. In sample 6, the tag *àbí* was used by LW to support or confirm the opinion expressed by LB. In sample 7, the end tag *ńkọ* was used by LB to signal an enquiry to VV. In sample 8, the tag *ó yá* was used by SS to quicken or hasten KA into action. In sample 9, the tag *sèbí* was used by BO to confirm a prior knowledge about BA. These switches were mainly for rhetoric purposes; their employment in the conversations above facilitated talk. By using these tags in everyday speech the refugees, to a little extent and momentarily, showed solidarity with the Yoruba language and culture. The examples of tag switches are unique cases of divergence because these tags did not occur due to the

presence of a member of the group that owns the language for the sake of social approval; rather it is in their absence. This is what Holmes (2008) terms referee design. However, to the extent that the respondents incorporated Yoruba terms in their conversations, they identified with Yoruba. This model of identity seems partial, because it represents an incomplete, ephemeral, and superficial means of showing a sense of belonging to another ethno-linguistic group. This is more so since members of the other group (Yoruba, in this case) may not see the use of those momentary tags as sufficient proof of integration, and therefore may not accept the user as one of them, or a member of the Yoruba culture.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The analysis of code-switching done in this study showed that the language device fulfilled pragmatic functions in multilingual interactions. More importantly, it helped to assign hyphenated and multiple identities to the respondents. The merit of the switches from one language to another is the speakers' capacity to signal different identities simultaneously and in the process lubricated discourse. As posited by Korth (2005), such dual or multiple identities are negotiated for the purpose of signalling different faces to different individuals which implies that the respondents belonged to multiple spheres and groups. The study showed that code-switching, in this instance, is triggered by varying factors namely greeting, announcement, quotation, and proverb. This is an indication that code-switching is not an arbitrary linguistic practice but a systematic strategy used by speakers to achieve socio-cultural objectives in the course of a conversation. Moreover, the pattern of switches provided ample reasons to suggest that the sampled respondents used for the study preferred the projection of a modern identity to that of an ethnic identity. Furthermore, code-switching was employed by the respondents as a veritable tool for either inclusion or exclusion (as the case may be) as suggested by Gibson (2004), and promoted by Giles and Coupland (1991).

It is recommended that refugees should pragmatically utilize their indigenous languages as a means of ensuring their maintenance and vitality, and boosting their ethnic image and bonding. In the same vein, refugees should identify more with the language of the host community. They stand to benefit immensely from such identification. Being a window to a culture, the acquisition of another language makes one a part of the other culture and people; makes one more acceptable to the other culture; promotes inter-ethnic bonding and peaceful co-existence; and creates socio-economic opportunities for the recipient. These are some of the benefits of inclusion and diversity.

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