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Identity and cultural expression in Nigerian hip hop

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound influence of vernacular language on the construction of identity and ideology within Nigerian hip hop music. By analyzing the lyrics of prominent Nigerian hip hop artists, the study highlights how artists like Olamide, 9ice, and Tuface utilize Nigerian Pidgin and local dialects such as Yoruba to forge a distinct cultural and national identity. These artists not only celebrate their linguistic heritage but also leverage it as a form of resistance against linguistic and cultural imperialism, promoting a nationalist ideology that resonates deeply with their local audience. The paper argues that the incorporation of vernacular language in Nigerian hip hop goes beyond mere artistic choice; it serves as a critical tool for social and political commentary. This linguistic strategy enables artists to address and critique socio-economic inequalities and political issues, making hip hop a voice for the marginalized. Moreover, the study sheds light on how the use of local dialects and pidgin enhances the accessibility and relatability of the music, thereby strengthening the bond between artists and their audiences. This exploration into the intersection of language, identity, and ideology in Nigerian hip hop not only enriches our understanding of the genre's cultural significance but also underscores the dynamic role of language in shaping artistic and social landscapes. The paper contributes to broader discourses on language policy, cultural expression, and identity politics within the global context of hip hop.

Keywords: Nigerian Hip Hop; Vernacular language; Cultural Identity; Linguistic imperialism; Nigerian Pidgin

1. Introduction

The domestication of hip-hop in Nigeria began in the early 1990s when Terry, Junior and Mouth MC, hip-hop artists in the group, Emphasis released the track Which One You Dey, (see Gbogi 2016). The domestication manifests in the choice of language adopted by the group in their song; they favoured the Nigerian Pidgin. At this time, hip hop cannot be said to be contending favourably with other genres of music in the country such as Juju, Fuji, etc. The release of 'Sakomo' in 1998 by the trio of Tony Tetula, Eedris Abdulkareem and Eddy Brown who were then members of the group 'Remedies' forever changed the status of Nigerian hip hop. The release of the song was a redefining moment in the history of Nigerian hip because it showed for once the direction that hip hop movement in Nigeria was going, it favoured the *Nigerianisation* of the hip hop movement as it was evident in the way the song combined the Yoruba language with the English language.

Hip-hop has been used for a long time by African American hip-hop stars to express their displeasure against the widespread socio-economic inequality confronting them. In other words, hip-hop serves as a tool in the hands of the marginalised social class and what Adedeji (2010) calls the "mouthpiece of expressive militant advocacy." The Nigerian society is a fertile ground for inequalities, poverty, and restiveness. Ugor (2009:66) in Adedeji (2010) confirms that "... young artists now criticise the political class for the failure of the state, the collapse of the economy, and the absence of basic infrastructures such as electricity, good roads, decent housing and an efficient health care system." Nigerian hip-hop artists convey their criticisms of the political class and sing about other issues such as love, poverty, sex and what have you, using vernacular languages. Nigerian Pidgin which can be said to be one of the vernacular languages in Nigeria

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is the language adopted by the hip-hop artists because it is a language which carries the burden of the Nigerian experience effectively.

Rose (1994), Adedeji (2010) and Omoniyi (2006) have examined origins, cultural influences and globalisation in hip-hop. While Rose (1994) identifies the cultural forms encompassed by hip-hop to include graffiti art, break-dancing and rap music, Adedeji situates hip-hop in the context of Yoruba cultural practices. However, despite a considerable body of existing work on Hip-Hop, attention to language use in Nigerian hip-hop has not been a primary research focus for scholars until recently, except work by Babalola and Taiwo (2009), Ajayi and Filani (2014), and Gbogi (2016). Most studies on vernacular language and identity construction are on American hip-hop (Cutler, 1999; Newman, 2002 and Alim, 2003). While existing studies on Nigerian hip-hop have paid attention to language use in hip-hop, rare are the studies focusing exclusively on vernacular language in Nigerian hip hop. The use of vernacular language to construct identity and couch ideology in Nigerian hip-hop has not been a primary research focus for scholars. Therefore, using songs from 7 selected Nigerian hip-hop artists as its empirical base, the following sections attempt to provide a picture of how hip-hop artists employ vernacular language to construct identity and couch ideology. Finally, this chapter will view the link between vernacular language and identity and ideology as contributing to a linguistic renaissance in which indigenous languages are competing favourably with the English language on the Nigerian linguistic stage. It will also establish the fact that Nigerian hip-hop is an educational tool, thus advocating more awareness for this genre of music in Nigeria. However, before we consider how vernacular language constructs identity and ideology in Nigerian hip-hop, let us have a brief discussion on language, identity and ideology.

2. Language and Identity

Language is a vital device employed by people in the social portrayal of everyday life (Rahim, 2008 cited in Aboh, 2013). Therefore, language is a social process. From time to time, language users articulate and reproduce their identities and ideological leanings. Every language, regardless of its status: first language, second language, vernacular languages, goes a long way in describing who we are. When people speak, the listeners can make conjectures about age, place of origin, level of education, etc. Aside from the language revealing details about an individual, language can symbolise national and ethnic identity. In the construction of identity, language plays a critical role.

Identity is a set of distinctiveness that defines an individual, or a group and language is a formidable channel for this distinctiveness (Ogungbemi 2023). For instance, if Nigerians meet one another outside the shores of the country, they may in addition to using their mother, if they share the same mother tongue, use the Nigerian English or Nigerian Pidgin. When this happens, we have an instance of collective identity. Auer (2007:1) describes collective identity as the “discourse of languages as the natural reflexes of national identities.” The notion that collective identities and languages are intertwined is a highly rated concept of modernity which is profoundly in language ideologies. Proponents of this idea firmly believe that every collectivity forms its identity using its language. Hence, the extensive vernacularization and indigenisation of Nigerian hip hop music point radically to the legitimisation of a Nigerian identity. A big implication of this is that the existence of collectivities, such as nations and ethnic or social groups is believed to be social and ideological constructs which rely on language as opposed to genetics, ancestry or birth (Aboh, 2013). Further, there is social identity. Here, individuals rely on the instrumentalities of language to identify with people considered as members of their group. People feel free to associate with others with whom they speak the same language.

Over the years, Nigerian hip-hop has functioned as a site for expressing and contesting identities. It is a platform for self-expression and discovery. Like other platforms of knowledge as Gates (1994:11), music is “one of the sites for contest and negotiation, self-fashioning and refashioning.” Songs can serve as a conduit to sexual, social and national identities. Through the language of delivery, which is often a combination of Nigerian pidgin and an artist’s mother tongue, the hip-hop movement in Nigeria can be said to have a truly Nigerian trademark.

3. Language and Ideology

The literature on ideology provides us with a variety of definitions that range from those that have neutral connotations to others that are pejorative. To van Dijk (1998:7) ideologies are the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members. His definition illustrates a non-negative evaluation of ideology. It is also not limited to ideologies that legitimise dominance and control. He further claims that ideologies both influence the content of discourse and are also acquired and transformed through discourse. Van Dijk’s perspective is akin to Fairclough’s (1995) interpretation of the role of discourse in society: discourse both constitutes and is constitutive of social practices. However, Thompson (1990), conceives ideology as a way by which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination. His definition of ideology is broad and is not restricted to conflicts between social classes but any form of domination. According to him:

- When established relations of power are systematically asymmetrical, then the situation may be described as one of domination. Relations of power are “systematically asymmetrical” when individuals or groups of individuals are endowed with power in a durable way which excludes, and to some significant degree, remains inaccessible to, other individuals or groups of individuals, irrespective of the basis upon which such exclusion is carried out. (1990: 151)

The dynamic and dialectical relationships of ideology allow it to take various semantic modes or forms.

The language as a carrier of ideology is thus ideological (Ogungbemi 2016; 2018). This echoes (Habermas', 1967: 259) claim about language as a medium of domination and social force and as a power legitimiser and organiser. Using language, those who have power and access can legitimise or delegitimise objects (persons, actions, institutions, etc.) in the world (Ogungbemi 2024). This process as described in Hall (1976 cited in Morley and Chen: 1996: 26) is “especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilise particular forms of power and domination”. And this is meant to “reconcile and accommodate the masses of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation.” The Nigerian hip hop plays a significant role as an art form and a carrier of ideology for many Nigerians both at home and elsewhere. Among its practitioners, hip-hop is a medium for transmitting an ideology, promoting a particular lifestyle. The Nigerian hip-hop movement thus conveys the ideological acuity of the hip-hop artists. In what follows, we attempt a discussion of how vernacular language is used to construct different forms of identity.

4. Vernacular language as a marker of cultural identity

The Nigerian hip-hop artists are interested in carving out an identity, giving Nigerian hip-hop a face with the mother tongue. Olamide, 9ice and Tuface promote the Nigerian culture through the vernacular language as demonstrated below:

4.1. Ex1

I'm made on the streets,
Why I no go blow
Originality work for me
Why I no go show
Asa was, ede wa
Ko sohun to da to
Na me dey want

4.1.1. Translation

I'm made on the streets
Why won't I be successful
Originality works for me
Why won't I be happy
Our culture, our language=
Nothing compares
It's me they want
(Street Credibility, 9ice ft Tuface)

In Excerpt 1, the artists are proud of Nigeria's indigenous cultures and languages. In Ex1, 9ice and Tuface openly identify with the indigenous language and culture. According to the singer-persona, nothing compares to our culture and language. In a way, the artist is saying that Nigerian hip-hop should be given its own identity via the indigenous languages. Many artists have heeded the call to give Nigerian hip hop the Nigerian identity through indigenous language. For our purposes here, we shall examine Olamide's song in Ex 2.

4.2. Ex 2

Won ni lyrics mi local
Shey Lil Wayne gbo Yoruba?
("Voice of the Street," Olamide)

4.2.1. Translation

They say my lyrics are local;
Does Lil Wayne understand Yoruba?

In what appears as an obvious response to some who are criticising him for using his mother tongue to create hip-hop that is cultural, the singer-persona asks the rhetorical question ‘Won ni lyrics mi local Shey Lil Wayne gbo Yoruba?’ When translated, ‘It is being said that my lyrics are local, does Lil Wayne understand Yoruba?’ To Olamide, hip-hop must necessarily be street credible and to be recognised on the street one must use the language the street understands. He refers to Lil Wayne to drive home his point. Lil Wayne is an American rapper who is known to rap in African American Vernacular English, a language that has come to give the American hip hop its identity. If Lil Wayne raps in a language that is understood by his fans, Olamide sees no reason why a Nigerian hip-hop artist must rap or sing in a foreign tongue. Our language, in Olamide’s case the Yoruba language must be used in Nigerian hip hop. The next section demonstrates how slangification of Yoruba words creates a social identity.

5. Vernacular language as a marker of social identity

Social identity in Nigerian hip hop is created using vernacular language especially slang words in the Yoruba language. The use of these slang words allows for youth-to-youth conversation whereby cultural, governmental and societal strictures can be circumvented.

The slang expressions illustrating our points here function as euphemisms for describing sexual organs and the act of having sex.

5.1. Ex 3

Oya pe Folake, Atinuke ati
Dupe ko wa bami ni nu Benz=
Me and my friends ka jo lo flex
Am I making sense?
MO TI **JE** GBOGBO ISE
MARY J MO TI **LA**
 (“Story for the gods,” Olamide)

5.1.1. Translation

Call Folake, Atinuke and
Dupe to come meet me in the Benz=
My friends and I to have a ball
Am I making sense?
I HAVE HAD SEX WITH MARY J.

Nigerian hip-hop artists are aware of the cultural and governmental strictures against public discussions of sex (see Dare 2005). Hence, they as opined by Gbogi (2016:182) “navigate the murky waters of vulgarity by employing double meaning as a back-handed linguistic strategy of reaching their audience.” Olamide employs two Yoruba slang words in EX3. The slang expressions, ‘Je’ and ‘La’ as used by Olamide in his track, ‘Story for the gods’ explain in a far-reaching way, how human activities receive sexual identity. There is a slangification of the Yoruba words ‘je’ and ‘la’. The word, ‘je’ in the Yoruba language means ‘to eat’ while ‘la’ means ‘to lick’. However, in the context of usage the two words are associated with the sexual craving of the singer-persona. By appealing to words relating to eating and tasting, the effect of the sexual innuendos they convey in the song has been considerably doused. One has to belong to the same speech community as Olamide to construe the meaning of the slang expressions. He plainly says he has had sex with the lady in question. The two Yoruba words, here, are not referring to eating and licking; their imports at this juncture go further than the literal.

5.2. Ex 4

O tun ro ejo mi fun Gbemileke
ONI EMI NI MO’MA FUN
OWUN NI IREKE
ONI EMI MO’KO FO OWUN
NIKE, FO OWUN **NIKE**

(“Ladi”, Olamide, Phyno and Lil Kesh)

5.2.1. Translation

She told Gbemileke about me=
SHE SAID I WAS THE ONE
GIVING HER SUGARCANE

An akin thought is expressed in Ex4; a collaboration by Olamide, Phyno and Lil Kesh. Again, two Yoruba slang words stand out. The words are ‘ike’ and ‘ireke’. ‘Ike’, among the youth is usually associated with the quality of being new. In many cultures of the world, a lady who is a virgin is considered brand new and untainted. Relying on this knowledge, the singer persona describes virginity as ‘ike’, a plastic that could be broken. The lady accuses him of deflowering her. To an unsuspecting listener who does not belong in the same youth culture as the hip-hop artists, ‘ike’ is plastic, but to the hip-hop artists and other members of the youth culture, the meaning of ‘ike’ goes beyond that. Further, The singer-persona intimates us with the slang word ‘ireke’, thus: *oni emi ni mo’ma fun o hun ni ireke*. When translated; she said *I was the one who used to give her sugarcane*. For many who do not belong in this youth culture, the semantic decoding is restricted to the denotative meaning of sugarcane. Nevertheless, encoded in the reference, ‘ireke’ is the image of the phallus, and this is well known to members of the youth culture. The other slang word in the song is ‘ike’ which originally means plastic in English. To members of the youth culture, the semantic decoding does not stop there. The next section examines how Nigerian hip-hop artists clamour for the use of Nigerian pidgin and vernacular language to create a national identity.

6. Nigerian pidgin and vernacular language as markers of national identity

Nigerian hip-hop artists also construct national identity via the code-switching of Nigerian pidgin and an artist’s mother tongue. This is illustrated below.

6.1. Ex 5

Atewo mo bala a o meni too koo,
We spit in pidgin, awon kan un wuko,
E je kan ma pofolo,
You better show them where you belong
Ruggedy baba opomulero mo jalekan
Sa ma wo won niran
Spit more in your mother tongue
Till the people say they want more
 (“Ruggedy Baba,” Rugged Man ft. 9ice)

6.1.1. Translation

I met lines on my palms, we don’t know who inscribed them
WE SPIT IN PIDGIN, SOME ARE COMPLAINING
Let them continue to lose,
You need to show them where you belong
All hail Ruggedman, the pillar that holds Nigerian hip-hop
Just keep looking at them
Sing more in your mother tongue
Till the people say they want no more

Showing where one belongs as posited by Rugged Man is a call to decide on whose sides of the language divide would the hip-hop artists be. Here, there is a choice between the colonial language and the vernacular language. The line ‘we spit in pidgin; some are grumbling’ clearly shows there are some artists and fans who do not favour the use of vernacular language in Nigerian hip hop. To an extent, this shows that the topography of Nigerian hip-hop is ideological language-wise. While some hip-hop artists prefer English and want to model their songs on the American style of hip-hop, Rugged Man feels the best language for Nigerian hip-hop is the vernacular language: Nigerian pidgin and the other local languages. He belongs to the school of those clamouring for the use of one’s local dialects and slang. It is observed that the singer-persona is moved by national cultural tenets buttressing pride in one’s heritage and traditional cultural aesthetics to clamour for the use of the vernacular language.

Using the Nigerian pidgin to mark national identity in hip-hop is evident in Sound Sultan’s track, “Mathematics.” This is discussed below.

6.2. Ex 6

My name is Sound Sultan your new Mathematics teacher
BY THE WAY, DO YOU UNDERSTAND PIDGIN ENGLISH?
YES SIR!
OKAY, NA WETIN WE GO USE HENCEFORTH.
(“Mathematics,” Sound Sultan)

6.2.1. Translation

My name is Sound Sultan your new Mathematics teacher
BY THE WAY, DO YOU UNDERSTAND PIDGIN ENGLISH?
YES SIR!
OKAY, THAT IS WHAT WE WILL USE HENCEFORTH.

Sound Sultan portrays the Nigerian pidgin as the language of prestige and pride. There is a renegotiation of the negative values once attached to the Nigerian pidgin and its speakers (see Gbogi 2017). He asks the question ‘do you understand pidgin English’ to which the class responds in the affirmative. He promptly tells the students ‘na wetin we go use henceforth’. He is in a way canvassing for the use of Nigerian pidgin as an alternative to the English language in the Nigerian hip-hop circle. In the song, Sound Sultan indexes national identity and power relationships between two languages: English and Nigerian pidgin, and how individuals in a multilingual society such as Nigeria, negotiate multiple identities. The song further reveals how the artist and his fans locate themselves vis-à-vis the prevailing language ideology in the country. By identifying with the Nigerian pidgin, Sound Sultan and his fans identify with their ‘heritage’ showing that Nigerian pidgin has become a prestige language in the Nigerian society. Apart from identity, Nigerian hip-hop artists also construct ideology vernacular language. This is illustrated below.

6.3. Ideology in hip-hop music in Nigeria

Following thoughts outlined in Kroskrity (2000:12), that in “any context there are often multiple language ideologies that interact and inform language use” we consider the processes of language choice in Nigerian hip-hop as functions of unequivocal and concealed language ideologies which underlie social life. Language ideologies consist of people’s beliefs and interests about the use of language in social life.

6.4. Nationalist ideology

Nationalism, one’s loyalty to one’s country is a common ideology in Nigerian hip hop. Hip-hop artists in the country openly subscribe to a nationalist ideology. An instance is seen

6.5. Ex 7

Ajo o da bile ee::
No matter where u go=
Make u try come back area o::
Area o::
Na Naija aa ah aa:::.
Ti ode ba ti le=
Pada wale o::
That one no say make u de bone area o::
Motherland e oo na your area.
(“Motherland,” Sound Sultan)

6.5.1. Translation

The foreign land is not like home
Wherever you go=
Try come back home::
Home::
It is Nigeria:::.
When the going gets tough=

Come back home::
 That shouldn't make you forget home::
 Motherland is your home::::

In Ex 7, Sound Sultan makes a case for nationalism in his track “Motherland.” He expresses his undying love for the country that he calls “Motherland”. When things become tough in another man’s land, the singer persona says one should come home. Home, that is, Nigeria is slangified as ‘area’, ‘naija’. The singer-persona is in effect advocating that Nigeria and Nigerian hip-hop becomes a ‘centre’. Omoniyi (2009:122) recognises this when he opines that members of various global hip-hop communities furnish themselves with a hip-hop history and ideology that ‘demarginalizes them and situates them squarely in the centre’.

In the geographical sense as well as the cultural sense, Nigerian hip hop can still be said to be in the margins as few of the artists in the Nigerian hip hop scene have been able to penetrate the global music market. However, hip hop artists such as Sound Sultan has continually made and constructed Nigeria and Nigerian hip hop as *centres* by emphasizing the excellence of the country and Nigerian hip hop music. Nationalism is evident in the song from the linguistic resources the singer-persona employs in the lines of the song. He makes use of slang expressions and the Nigerian Pidgin. The kind of language use obviously indexes Sound Sultan as not just a nationalist but also an advocate for the motherland. He feels a particular closeness with not just the country; he wants to make music that celebrates the greatness of the country. He encourages others not to abandon the country which he variously refers to as ‘naija’ and ‘area’. In what follows in the next section, vernacular language is used to construct linguisticism.

7. Conclusion

The study has paid attention to how vernacular language, including Nigerian pidgin, creates and maintains identities, and how the choice of the Nigerian Pidgin is a confrontation to the existing linguistic order. Vernacular language is a weapon for inclusion, that is, it affords the hip-hop artists the opportunity to include their teeming fans who are mainly youth. The discussion of Nigerian Pidgin shows how effective the language has become in creating a bond that is beyond ethnic and cultural strictures and a tool to effectively counter linguistic and political imperialism. The discussion of slang expressions reveals that slang words are not deviant expressions, but they are weapons for legitimising identities. Discussing language ideology, we submit that the processes of language choice in Nigerian hip-hop reveals unequivocal and concealed language ideologies which comprise people’s beliefs and interests about the use of language in social life.

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