

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND STEREOTYPES AMONG THE URHOB0 IN BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper reports findings of a sociolinguistic study which investigated the manifestations of identities through stereotypes among the Urhobo in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The research aimed to identify and analyse how the Urhobo and the Ijaw perceived and labelled each other. This study adopted the Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory and a qualitative approach in which the data elicited from some of the respondents were subjected to an ethnographic analysis. The data were collected through oral interview and participant observation and the question sought to know what words each group used to refer to each other. The study reveals that the Urhobo and their host community (the Ijaw) had negative perception of each other as they negatively identified one another. The implication of the exchange of perception is the creation of 'us' and 'them'. In this case, the migrants saw themselves as 'us' and perceived their host as 'them'. The creation of boundaries (linguistic or social) has the effect of constraining relationship between the two groups. This tendency is capable of making each group to distance from the other and the relationship between both groups could be strained.

Keywords: identities, stereotypes, boundaries, Bayelsa State, Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory

1 Introduction

Stereotypes are often negative, imposed identities, false belief, overgeneralised belief and incorrect assumption made about all of the members of a particular group. It is an expectation that people might have about every person of a particular group. While it is true that such generalizations or assumptions about a group or groups of people may be useful when making quick decisions, they may be erroneous when applied to particular individuals and are among the reasons for prejudice attitudes. All through life, people attach labels to us, and those labels

reflect and affect how others think about our identities as well as how we think about ourselves. According to (Hudson 1996; Bloor & Bloor, 2007), stereotypes are ethnic labels used by groups to identify other groups. Gibson (2004) posits that language is a dual means of projecting our identity and a means for others to project onto us their own perceptions of the way we are. This is to aver that stereotypes are actually imposed identities, which are usually negative. However, the imposition is not the exclusive preserve of the majority group; minority groups are also wont to impose identities on fellow minority groups as well as on majority groups. Stereotypes are ethnic or national labels used by groups to identify other groups (Hudson 1996; Bloor& Bloor 2007). Such labels are mainly negative, all-encompassing and born out of prejudice, as stated by Bloor and Bloor (2007:128):

One outcome of prejudice is the creation of stereotypes. Certain qualities, real or imaginary, are taken as typical of the target category, and there is an underlying assumption that all members of the category conform to this stereotype.

This is an indication of the fact that stereotypes are hyperbolic constructs meant to emphasise a salient social behaviour. It is hyperbolic because it tends to unnecessarily exaggerate a trait by the process of inclusion. Thus, a character trait exhibited by one or few individuals is used to classify the entire group, sometimes without exemption. Such character traits, or what Hayakawa (1972:7) calls 'abstractions' are mainly negative constructs and include aspects of physical characteristics, styles of behaviour, morality and other criteria like social class, skin colour, language nationality, dialect, religion, gender, sexual preference, place of birth, ancestral origin, social customs (Fairclough 1995:87; Bloor and Bloor 2007). Hayakawa (1972:68), identifies a dual system of analyzing labels which he terms 'informative and affective connotations'. The informative connotation is a statement of the fact while the affective connotation is a judgement on the fact. These assumptions lead their holders to behave in the same way. Some of these assumptions are feelings of cultural superiority whose effect is to look down or devalue other cultures.

2. Literature Review

Kerswill (2010) examines a sociolinguistic analysis of stereotyping and language use. The study observes that stereotyping is a pervasive phenomenon in human communication, influencing how individuals perceive and interact with others. Language plays a crucial role in stereotyping, as it can reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes. The study employs a sociolinguistic perspective, analysing language variation in different social contexts. The researcher collects data through a mixed method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The study found that language use reinforces and challenges stereotypes and that sociolinguistic variation plays a significant role in stereotype formation. Specifically, language use can perpetuate stereotypes by using derogatory terms or reinforcing negative attitudes. Language use can also challenge stereotypes by promoting positive attitudes and using inclusive language. In addition, sociolinguistic variation, such as accent, dialect, or language use can influence stereotype formation. In conclusion, the study highlights the importance of language in shaping stereotypes and demonstrates the need for further research between language use and stereotype formation.

Bucholtz (2011) explores language, stereotypes and identity construction. The study notes that language plays a crucial role in shaping identity, and stereotypes can influence how individuals construct and negotiate their identities. The study employs a sociolinguistic perspective, analysing language variation in different social contexts. The results of the study indicate that language use influences the construction of stereotypes and identities, that sociolinguistic factors play a significant role in shaping identity construction. The study underscores the pivotal role of language in forming identities and reveals a significant research gap in understanding the complex relationships between language use, stereotypes, and identity construction, emphasizing the need for further investigation.

Mayer (2012) studies cultural diplomacy and stereotypes in present-day Czecho-German relations. The research explores how cultural diplomacy can reduce stereotypes and promote a shared identity between Czech and German communities. The study uses an empirical approach to validate its theory. The findings of the study reveal that cultural diplomacy initiatives can reduce stereotypes and promote a shared identity between Czech and German communities. Moreover, cultural diplomacy

initiatives that focus on people-to-people exchanges and cultural events are more effective in reducing stereotypes than initiatives that focus on economic and political cooperation. The study concludes by noting that people-to-people exchanges and cultural events can promote mutual understanding and cooperation.

Kramersch (2013) surveys language, identity and investment. Kramersch contends that investment is crucial in understanding how learners construct their identities through language learning. The study emphasizes the need to consider the social context in which language learning takes place. The study finds that learners' investment in language learning is influenced by the social contexts in which language learning takes place. It further adds that learners who were more interested in language learning were more likely to experience a sense of identity transformation.

Nwagbo (2014) investigates language and identity in Oru Refugee Camp, Ogun State, Nigeria. The study investigates the manifestation of identities in language use, attitudes, stereotypes and code alternation/borrowing among Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees with a view to evaluating the identity preferred by the refugees. The study reveals that stereotypes were negative as Liberians labelled Sierra Leoneans 'violent people' while Sierra Leoneans labelled Liberians 'Okafrieowey' (wayward). All respondents resisted being labelled 'omo refugee' by Nigerians because it is discriminatory and preferred respectable identities like 'sir and 'madam'.

Kim and Lee (2018) investigate how online communities shape identity construction and stereotyping, emphasizing the importance of considering online contexts in comprehending identity formation. The researchers observe that one of the key factors that shape identity construction is stereotyping, which refers to the process of categorizing individuals into groups based on preconceived notions and biases. They note that the impact of stereotyping on identity construction is not limited to marginalized groups. Research has also shown that stereotyping can affect identity construction in online communities, where individuals may feel pressure to conform to certain norms and expectations. For instance, individuals may feel pressure to present themselves in a certain way online, such as using certain language or hashtags in order to fit in with certain groups or communities.

Spencer and Logel (2018) examine how stereotype threat affects the identity construction of women in STEM fields, highlighting the importance of considering contextual factors in understanding identity formation. According to the authors, research has shown that stereotyping can have a profound impact on identity construction, particularly for marginalized groups. The authors observe that women in STEM fields are often subject to stereotypes that portray them as less competent and less capable than their male counterparts

Kumar and Raju (2019) discuss the relationship between stereotyping and identity construction from a social psychological perspective, highlighting the role of cognitive processes in shaping identity. The researchers affirm that stereotypes can be positive or negative, but they often lead to oversimplification and misrepresentation of individuals and groups. The authors opine that the construction of identity is a complex and multifaceted process that is influenced by various factors, including social norms, cultural values and personal experiences.

Drake (2020) examines how stereotypes affect the identity construction of African American women, emphasizing the importance of considering intersectionality in understanding identity formation. Drake notes that African American women are often subject to stereotypes that portray them as strong, aggressive, and confrontational. These stereotypes, according to him, can be damaging to African American women's sense of self and identity and self-efficacy, as they can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, doubt, inadequacy, uncertainty, and imposter syndrome.

Majumdar et al (2022) explore how young Indian users perform their gender identities on social media, highlighting the role of social identity norms in shaping online interactions. The researchers note that social media has become an integral part of modern life, and it plays a significant role in shaping identity construction, particularly for young people. Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook provide individuals with a sense of identity and belonging, as well as a platform for self-presentation. However, social media can also perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce social norms, which can negatively impact identity construction.

Yu (2025) investigates impact of social stereotypes on women's identity.

The study focuses on the profound impact of social stereotypes, especially traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes on women's identity and explores how to construct a new feminist identity based on them. The study notes that traditional gender stereotypes limit women's roles to the domestic and emotional spheres, emphasizing their tender, dependent qualities. This solidified perception not only limits women's career development social participation but also profoundly affects their self-perception and identity. The study observes that on the one hand, feminist stereotypes may overemphasize women's independence and antagonism, ignoring the diversity and differences within women, also posing a complex impact on women's identity. On the other hand, feminist stereotypes may cause women to feel confused and pressured about their identity when pursuing feminist goals. On this basis, the study proposes strategies for constructing a new feminist identity. The paper was of the view that feminist identity should transcend the limitations of traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes, advocate gender equality and individual freedom, and respect women's diversity and differences. The significance of the study is that it provides theoretical support and practical guidance for the construction of a more egalitarian, inclusive, and pluralistic feminist identity through an in-depth exploration of the impact of social stereotypes on women's identity.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT). Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory is a social psychological approach proposed by Giles and Johnson in 1981 as an extension of Social Identity Theory (SIT), (Oakes, 2001, cited in Nwagbo, 2014). This is a suggestion that ELIT shares the same fundamental principles of belongingness with SIT which are: social categorization, social identity, social comparison and psychological distinctives all for the purpose of enhancing individuals' self-esteem (Kametani, 2010). Both ELIT and SIT are conditioned on the notion of the 'other' as opposed to 'self'. 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 (Giles and Johnson, 1987).

However, as an extension of SIT, ELIT incorporates three additional factors, which according to Oakes (2001:37) are claimed to determine 'the salience of ethnolinguistic identity': perceived permeability of boundaries, multiple group memberships and ethnolinguistic vitality. First, the perceived permeability of boundaries deals with the strength or otherwise of intergroup limits. Therefore, boundaries perceived as soft facilitate social mobility while boundaries perceived as hard obstruct mobility and lead to pronounced ethnolinguistic identities on both divides. If the boundary is soft, individuals will relate well with members of the other ethnolinguistic groups while relationship is strained if the boundary is hard. Second, ELIT introduces multiple group membership which states that the number of social groups to which an individual belongs reveals their strength of ethnolinguistic identity (Oakes,2001). Such groups could be professional, age, social class, culture, etc. What this entails is that an individual who belongs to few social groups would normally have a strong ethnolinguistic identity while an individual who belongs to many social groups would have a weakened ethnolinguistic identity. This is so because association with several social groups whose membership cut across different ethnic groups will naturally moderate the degree of one's identity with one's ethnolinguistic group. Finally, ELIT proposes the idea of ethnolinguistic vitality which is what makes a group likely to behave as a distinct entity in intergroup relations (Giles and Coupland, 1977). Vitality of a language means that it is used and transmitted from one generation to another generation.

4. Methodology and Data Collection

The methodology employed a qualitative approach in which the data elicited from some of the respondents were subjected to an ethnographic analysis. The research instruments employed are interviews and participant observation. The spontaneous conversations of the participants were audio recorded and the question sought to know what

words each group used to refer to each other.

The collection of data for this study was based on purposive sampling technique from three Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State. The Local Government Areas are Sagbama, Southern Ijaw, and Yenagoa. This method is best used for community situations. First, this method was employed because of the limited number of the population. Second, the study is not inclusive of all the groups in Bayelsa State, but restricted specifically to the Urhobo Community.

5. Construction of Identities through Stereotypes

This section discusses the manifestation of identities through stereotypes. As discussed in the introduction section, stereotypes are negatively imposed identities meant to emphasise a social behaviour. We will briefly consider how the Urhobo and Ijaw labelled and perceived each other. Respondents revealed through oral interviews some negative constructs or labels both groups used in referring to each other. Below are interview extracts:

5.1. Data Presentation, Discussion and Analysis

Example 1: My brother, Ijaw people dey make trouble well well, no be small; dem dey cruel violent and dirty. Na so dem dey carry shit for river. Na make we dey call dem 'inekuame'. Na sense we take dey follow dem live for here if not na so so fight we for dey fight every day (Chief Azikiwe – Sagbama)

Example 2: They are heartless and wicked and unfriendly. That is why in Urhobo, if we want to describe somebody who is 'revengeful, cruel and brutal, we say 'osiario kerę ọwweřę'. Besides, their men are lazy. In as much as they can wake up in the morning, drink ogogoro and play 'apele', they are satisfied with life. It is their women who are hard-working and fend for the family. (Tega – Yenagoa)

Example 3: For the number of years I have been here, I have discovered they are very aggressive and hostile. 'You no go fit do dem take'. Another thing is that they womanize a lot. They like women with big butts who can 'shake it very well' (Clement – Southern Ijaw)

Example 4: Ijaw people! Echa! God forbid! If I get house, Ijaw person no go fit stay my compound because I no get power for trouble. See their children, many of them no dey go

school. Na 'kpokpo garri' (tapioca) and fish dem take dey brush mouth for morning and na so dem dirty too (- Beauty – Sagbama)

Example 5: We Urhobo people call them 'ẹvweṛẹ; or sarcastically ẹmẹ vweṛẹ (a little native pot). We also refer to them as 'ihwo ṛẹ ovṛẹn' (people of the other world across the river). It is said that wherever there is a river, an Ijaw born is not far off. They are water people. This may explain why most of them, especially their women are possessd by water spirits (- Finetiti – Yenagoa)

Example 6: Urhobo people are too greedy for my liking, especially when it comes to money. My experience with one of them is better imagined than described. That is why we call them 'okuboyekrọkame'/okubo egbegi (Michael – Yenegoa)

Example 7: They are dishonest and insincere. They are deceptive kind of people with evil intentions. Is that not the reason we describe them as 'biusekame' – bad people – (Abalagha – Sagbama)

Example 8: Well, it may not be all, but many Urhobo people are quarrelsome. If they owe you money, instead of them to pay, they turn it to making trouble. They behave as if they are powerful but their power is only on land, and not on water like Ijaw. We describe Urhobo people as 'isobokṛẹ igboladabokṛọ or Urhobo kpṛa ogboladekṛọ' meaning they derive their power on land not on water. They are afraid of water but strong on land. (- Adagogo – Sagbama)

Example 9: Urhobo people and starch are like siamese twins. You cannot separate them from starch eating – we call them 'biutukosumẹṇẹ 'starch eaters' and 'opiasubetu'. That is, people who fight with cutlass.

The interview extracts above (1-5) reveal how the Urhobo perceive the Ijaw, the host community. The interviews show that the Ijaw are labelled negatively. The Urhobo perceive the ijaw as being troublesome, cruel, inhumane and dirty. The Urhobo's perception of the Ijaw as 'troublesome, cruel, inhumane and dirty is a stark illustration of negative stereotyping. By calling the Ijaw 'inekuame' (= those who excrete on water bodies) suggests that the Ijaw are not 'neat and decent'. The 'inekuame' is particularly noteworthy, as it implies a lack of respect for environmental hygiene and communal well-being. This stereotype may stem from

cultural or historical differences in waste management practices or interactions with water bodies. The consequences of such labelling can lead to social ostracism, mistrust, even hostility towards the Ijaw community. Describing the Ijaw as heartless, wicked and unfriendly depicts them as people devoid of human sympathy or feelings. The Urhobo label Ijaw men as being lazy people who wake up in the morning and take hard drink and play draught abandoning their family responsibilities to their wives as alleged by the interviewee in example 2. The Urhobo's categorization of Ijaw men as 'lazy' and prone to excessive drinking and gambling is a damaging stereotype that perpetuates negative attitudes towards the Ijaw. This label may be rooted in cultural differences in work ethic, leisure activities, or social expectations. However, it overlooks the complexities of individual experiences and the diversity within the Ijaw community. Such stereotype can lead to discrimination, prejudice and unequal treatment. Clement in example 3 sees the Ijaw as being hostile and their men, especially as promiscuous. Clement's perception of the Ijaw as 'hostile' and their men as 'promiscuous' reinforces the notion that the Urhobo view the Ijaw as a threat to their social norms and values. This stereotype may arise from cultural differences in courtship practices, marriage customs, or sexual mores. However, it is essential to recognize that such labels can perpetuate harmful attitudes towards the Ijaw, particularly women, and contribute to a culture of mistrust and hostility. (Ikolo, 2024:158)

The interviewee's position in example 4 corroborates what Chief Azikiwe and Tega said. By categorising the Ijaw as such, the Urhobo see themselves as peace-loving, chaste, neat and hard-working people. The Urhobo's self-perception as 'peace-loving', 'chaste', 'neat' and 'hard-working' people, in contrast to their negative labelling of the Ijaw, illustrates the phenomenon of in-group bias. This bias leads individuals to attribute positive qualities to their own group while derogating out-groups. Such self-perception can reinforce social cohesion within the Urhobo community but may also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and prejudice towards the Ijaw. The Ijaw are perceived to be victims possessed of water spirit since they are found close to water bodies as mentioned in example 5. Again, this negative label could breed hostility, hatred and acrimony towards the Ijaw. The Urhobo's perception of the Ijaw as 'victims possessed by water spirits' is a fascinating example of how cultural and spiritual beliefs can influence inter-group perceptions. This stereotype may stem from the Ijaw's historical and cultural

connections to water bodies which may be viewed as mysterious or even threatening by the Urhobo. Such labels can perpetuate fear, mistrust, and hostility towards the Ijaw community.

The Ijaw also have a wrong impression or perception about the Urhobo as seen in the interview extracts in examples 6-9. The Ijaw see the Urhobo as too money-conscious and greedy. The Ijaw's perception of the Urhobo as 'money-conscious' and 'greedy' highlights the complexities of inter-group perceptions. This stereotype may arise from cultural differences in economic values, social status, or material possessions. However, it is essential to recognize that such labels can perpetuate negative attitudes towards the Urhobo, particularly in economic and business transactions. Moreover, the Urhobo are seen as being dishonest, deceptive people with evil intentions as alleged by Abalagha. What this translates into is that the Ijaw see themselves as being honest, incorruptible and good people with good intentions. This characterization of the Urhobo as 'dishonest' and 'deceptive' people with 'evil intentions' is a damaging stereotype that can perpetuate mistrust and hostility. The implication of this negative label is that the Ijaw are likely to be cautious and wary in dealing with the Urhobo, especially in business matters. This label may stem from cultural differences in communication styles, conflict resolution, or social norms. However, it ignores the complexities of individual differences and diversity within the Urhobo community.

The Urhobo are perceived by the Ijaw respondents as troublemakers while they (the Ijaw) are troubleshooters. This illustrates the phenomenon of self-serving bias. This bias leads individuals to attribute positive qualities to themselves while derogating others. Such self-perception can reinforce social cohesion within the Ijaw community but may also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and prejudice towards the Urhobo. Designating the Urhobo as 'quarrelsome' has serious implications for mutual interaction and cross-cultural communication. It presupposes that both groups may encounter problems interacting with each other. This is not healthy because the importance of integration between the migrants and their host cannot be overemphasised. A strained relationship will impede integration just as a robust inter-group communication will enhance integration. By saying that the Urhobo are only powerful on land and not on water, the respondents imply that the power of the Ijaw is only restricted to water while that of the Urhobo to land. This, again, highlights the complexities of inter-group perceptions and power dynamics. This

distinction is capable of inciting and provoking conflict between the two groups. This stereotype may stem from historical and cultural differences in territorial control, economic activities, or social status. However, such labels can result in unhealthy competition, tension, and conflict between the two groups.

The above discussion on stereotypes reveals the extent to which the migrants have categorised themselves 'we' and their host community 'them'. Thus, when labels are imposed, it implies that members are conscious of the differences between their group and others. The imposition of identity to a large extent entails social categorisation and comparison. No group wants to be identified or labelled in a negative light. Hence each group tries to categorise itself as being positive-minded and right and others as being negative-minded and wrong. For example, the Urhobo labelled the Ijaw as aggressive, dirty and cruel which presupposes that the Urhobo are peace lovers, neat and considerate. Similarly, the Ijaw labelled the Urhobo as greedy, deceivers and troublesome which implies or suggests that Ijaw people are contented, honest and calm.

The implications of these derogatory labels and negative identities have serious and harmful consequences. First, it could result in social distance between groups. Second, it could constrain the relationship between both groups. Third, it could incite and ignite unnecessary tension, violence, discrimination, unequal treatment, disharmony and erect walls of hatred and enmity. Nonetheless, the distinction between the 'us' and 'them' is capable of promoting in-group solidarity and group consciousness.

6. Conclusion

The research involved the perception of a group by another group and vice versa. This paper suggests that no group is immune from others' perception. This study has shown that the negatively imposed labels or stereotypes which are products of prejudices were utilised in the categorization of the Self and Other. The implication of the biased and faulty judgements is hatred, conceit, mockery, distrust, bitterness, etc. all of which can result in the creation of boundaries between groups and foster conflict and discrimination.

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