Online Negotiation of Ethnic Identity

Innocent Chiluwa

Abstract

This study applies a computer-mediated discourse analysis to investigate identity in the social media. Mainly blogs and discussion forums, the study shows that online communication mediates social and cultural issues and that the Internet has been adapted as a medium to negotiate perceived endangered ethnic identities. This has been illustrated in this study, using the Biafra campaign groups. The data comprises 250 blog posts, obtained mainly from the ‘BiafraNigeria World,’ viewed and analysed as discourse, with a focus on social meaning, identity construction and language structure. The study concludes that the Internet is a key site for social interaction, civic engagement and identity negotiation. The Biafra Campaign Group forms a virtual community for the purpose of asserting their ethnic identity and to seek political independence from Nigeria. Members apply language strategies such as code-switching, proverbs and ethnic labels to project their uniqueness.

Keywords: Biafra, identity, discourse, internet, social interaction, Nigeria

Introduction

A number of studies in linguistics and social sciences has given some interesting insights to the adaptability of the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) to political and socio-cultural issues, (see Herring, 2001; Hoffman, et al, 2004; Taiwo 2010; Ifukor 2010; Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011; Chiluwa, 2011c, 2012a, 2012d). According to Hoffman, et al (2004), the Internet has become indispensable to individuals, families and social groups and a major influence on people’s everyday lives. Users such as ‘netizens,’ ‘bloggers’ or ‘tweeters,’ now network and form virtual communities as a platform for information exchange and coordinated group actions. Interestingly, in recent times, online social networks have been adapted to do social activism and civil protests. The first Egyptian revolution that ousted Hosni Mubarak for example, has been attributed to the success of Twitter which was used as alternative press; where many tweeters performed the functions of citizen journalists. Professional journalists also used Twitter and Facebook to transmit news and photos (see Chiluwa and Adetunji (2013). In the Arab spring generally, planning discussions also happened on social media where activists talked to each other, mobilized protesters and promoted new strategies (Chiluwa, 2012d).

In Nigeria, political associations, social and civil rights groups have utilized the Internet and networking sites as active media for political participation (Chiluwa, 2011c; 2012a.) Ifukor
(2010) for instance, shows that access to social media (both blogging and micro-blogging) enhances civil engagements and that blogs and Twitter were effectively utilized by voters in the Nigerian 2007 general elections and the re-run elections of 2009. Chiluwa (2011c) also reveals that bloggers in a major Nigerian online community (i.e. Naijapals) utilize the forums to seek political and social reforms.

This paper examines the identity question of the Igbo of the southeast Nigeria, as advocated mainly by the online Biafra Campaign Group (BCG). The main questions addressed here are (i) how has the BCG applied online forums to advance their quest for ethnic identity? (ii) why is this quest important and (iii) what is the overall mission of the group?

Background

The Nigerian civil war which was fought between July 1967 and January 1970 has been viewed as a major struggle for the survival of the Igbo in Nigeria (Duruji, 2009). Following the end of the civil war in which over three million Igbos died in 1970, another ‘war’ seemed to begin (Aneke, 2007) which has been described as ‘the Igbo question in Nigeria’ (Ojukwu, 2009). According to Uwalaka (2003), it is a war against the Igbo psyche, their self-consciousness and economic welfare. This has been widely captured in the word ‘marginalization,’ which according to the campaign groups consists in a deliberate official activity of the government and political elite to keep the Igbo permanently deprived and psychologically defeated. Thus, fear has driven the Igbo into a ‘denigrating state of self-deprecating meekness’ in which they protect an image of ‘a wild mannered ethnic group’, (Uwalaka, 2003:25), a meekness, which other ethnic groups have construed as cowardice. The BCG has often cited clear instances of deliberate victimization of the Igbo, ranging from outright exclusion from participatory governance to deliberate marginalization from economic resources. Hence, the BCG and Ohaneze Ndigbo (an Igbo cultural elite group) have argued that the Igbo have been unjustly and maliciously discriminated against and almost excluded from the rest of Nigeria.

With this background of perceived violation of nationalistic principles in favour of tribal and ethnic interests, it is most likely that ethnic nationalism and a commitment to self-determination will evolve. MASSOB (Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra) and other BCG represent ethnic nationalism, where ethnic identity borne out of a sense of injustice has become so important. These groups seek to achieve unity, autonomy, recognition and group interest by mobilizing ethnic based constituencies (Norbu, 1992; Ojukwu, 2009). Ojukwu (2009) further argues that groups that feel partially or completely submerged and alienated in a state that they do not feel belonged can be tempted to demand for a separate nationhood. For instance, the 19th and 20th centuries, have been marked by ethnic and cultural nationalism where the Tibetans for example, have sought independence from China; the Scottish national party had argued for a separate Scottish nationality within Britain and the state of Bosnia was torn apart in 1992 when the Serbs in Bosnia declared that they were different from the Muslims and Croatians (Ojukwu, 2009:185). Most recently in Africa, Southern Sudan secured a separate state from the dominant Muslim north after several years of civil war.
In recent times, the Biafra dream is being pursued by a pro-Biafra activist movement known as the ‘Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra’ (MASSOB), whose activities are increasingly gaining online popularity and are discussed in social networking sites. It is most likely that the group has gainfully utilized the Internet to mobilize supports from Nigerian youths, attracted sympathy, as well as popularized their objectives among members of the international community. MASSOB still advocates a separate geo-political space for Igbo people and accuses the Nigerian state of marginalizing them. The activities of MASSOB not only query the citizenship question in Nigeria, but have consistently opposed the rationale in the corporate existence of the Nigerian state, which has created an identity dilemma for the Igbo nation (Nkolika, 2007). Biafra campaigners in Diaspora especially in the United States and United Kingdom insist on the actualization of the ‘Sovereign State of Biafra’ or ‘the United States of Biafra’ (Chiluwa, 2012d). The main body of the campaign group claims to be recognized by the United Nations and other powerful nations of the world. Their programmes and activities are said to be coordinated from their headquarters in Washington D.C.

Ukiwo (2009) has argued that state violence against ethnic minorities was the main cause of the secessionist attempt by Biafra, which has continued to promote ethnic nationalism in contemporary Nigeria. The methods of the Biafra protests according to Nkolika (2007) have been provincial and non-violent, characterized mainly by mild petition to the Nigerian government and demanding negotiation for separate existence.

**Online Social Movements and Minority Identities**

Studies of the representation of minorities in the media have established that the media play a significant role in legitimizing identities and that the media have had the power to create the identities of the ‘other’ in some particularly (subjective) ways (see Chiluwa, 2011b). Ungerleider (1991) for instance (citing the Canadian media practice) has argued that what the opinion of the general public is about minorities is generally determined by the traditional news media and that minority groups are under-represented and more apt to be portrayed as villains and victims.

However, with the advent of the Internet and social media technology, discriminated minorities and marginalized groups have been empowered to represent themselves the way they consider the most appropriate. In particular, they negotiate their individual and groups identities not only with the traditional media, but also with the rest of the world.

The utilization of computer-based communication systems, especially social media by youths in North Africa and the Arab world and the results and promise of socio-political revolutions around the world, has proved the extent to which digital communication has given people (including radical and activist movements) a voice. Popular responses through digital social networks have been the radical rejection of erstwhile oppressive governments and social systems perpetuated by some politicians. The increasing agitations for social change and
political reforms around the world are traceable to the realisation of the potentials of online social networks, which have often been credited with the ‘success’ of the Arab Spring. Arguably, the various mass protests by workers, trade unions, individuals and social groups around the world constitute some forms of identity re-negotiation, where the people are motivated to re-construct and re-establish their cultural ideologies and sociopolitical rights.

Although, several scholarly works on social protests and activist movements on the Internet agree that the Internet and ICTs are significantly changing the ways activists communicate, collaborate and demonstrate (Garrett, 2006), the use of social media platforms (e.g. Twitter) to communicate to the international community and to carry out protests, as well as organize effectively, are likely not that of organizing or mobilizing actions/reactions, rather that of awareness and advocacy, particularly with respect to the international audience (Gaffney (2010). Furthermore, Gurak and Logie (2003:26) though acknowledging the ‘rich opportunities for social action and persuasion’ on the Internet, maintain that online protests have the problems with fact-checking and that of credibility. Salter (2003) also argues that social movements shape the Internet to suit the form of communication that satisfies their interests. He further argues that the successes and failures of social movements are not quite easy to tell because of the complexity of the relationship between the society, the Internet, the government and socio-political movements. Vegh (2003) adds that while online activists perceive their actions as legitimate protests in cyberspace, the targeted corporations or governments regard them as online security breaches or national security threats.

*BiafraNigeria World* (BNW) under study is part of the Biafra online network that comprises links to subsidiary websites such as ‘Voice of Biafra,’ ‘Biafra Online,’ ‘Biafra Forum,’ MASSOB, ‘and the Biafra Liberation Movement (BLM). These represent digital platforms for the positive representation of the Biafra identity. The main message of these bulletin boards (or online forums) is to demand the actualization of the defunct state of Biafra through non-violent means and particularly using the social media to champion the Biafran liberation mission. Non-registered members of the group do not have access to any of the sites. Therefore, all ‘Biafrans’ (notably the Igbos) are advised to register as members and participate in the discussion forums. The BNW web forums though permit reading by unregistered visitors, allow only registered members to post messages. Each registered user has a profile page, where he/she posts information or post comments on existing topics.

Thus, the BNW serves as a virtual community for the Biafra campaigners. A ‘virtual community’ in this context is the gathering of people, in an online ‘space’ where they come, connect, and communicate/interact with one other (Rheingold, 1993). Androustopoulos (2006) argues that a virtual community should interact regularly, around a shared interest or purpose with the development of definitely defined social roles, hierarchies and shared norms; these would anchor on a sense of common history and awareness of difference from other groups. Relating this to the roles of the BCG, it is clear that this group identifies the common history of its members most of who are Igbos. And they share the history of the civil war as main actors and are viewed as ‘rebels’ who see themselves now as suffering from generational punishment in form of economic denials and social exclusion (Chiluwa, 2012:224).
Methodology

A sociolinguistic based computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) has been adopted in this study in order to show how Internet discourses reveal important sociolinguistics issues such as virtual community, identity, ethnography, language variations, multilingualism and social interaction (Androutsopoulos, 2006). Herring (2001:612) has defined computer-mediated discourse (CMD) as ‘the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers.’ And CMD focuses on the study of language and language use in computer networked environments, with the use of methods of discourse analysis to address that focus. CMDA should therefore account for structures of meaning, interaction, and social behavior from the smallest to largest linguistic unit of analysis of online discourse (Herring 2004). Two basic factors that shape CMD are (i) medium factors, i.e. an attempt to discover under what circumstances specific systems affect communication and in what ways and (ii) situation factors, i.e. information about participants, their relationships to one another, their purposes for communication and the kind of language they use. The latter factors, which seek some sociolinguistic information about participants, are further sub-divided into categories such as participation structure, participant characteristics, interactional norms (attitudes, beliefs, ideologies and motivation) and goal of interaction (Herring (2007). Investigation of social interaction will examine the role of culture in shaping interaction and how language or discourse strategies are used to project a particular in-group interest. This study views the BCG as a virtual community and highlights strategies that members utilize to define and negotiate their ethnic identity in the Nigerian state.

The data for this study comprise mainly text-based downloads from MASSOB websites and other websites connected to the BCG. However data are obtained mainly from the Biafra NigeriaWorld (BNW). On the whole, a total of 250 posts were sampled, and analyzed in the research. They are numbered P1 to P250 (however, due to the restricted space of this study, samples shown in the analysis, start from P7). ‘P’ standing for ‘Post’. The posts covered the key topics of all 250 posts covering the main concerns of the Biafran liberation agitation. Many of the 250 posts overlap in content; in fact some are almost a repetition of previous posts. The posts that are too closely related are combined and considered as one in the data. The posts that are analyzed are considered as clearly revealing the sociolinguistic character of digital discourse, reflecting identity, virtual community and social interaction. For the limited space of this chapter, only specific posts are reproduced in the analysis.

Negotiating the Biafran Identity

‘Identity’ is a sense of belonging to social categories (De Fina, 2006). According to Tajfel (1981:255, cited in De Fina, 2006:355), it is ‘that part of an individual’s self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with a
value and emotional significance attached to that membership.’ However, membership loyalty is not static, but changes according to social or historical circumstances. So people’s commitment to social or ethnic groups and the meaning they attach to social categories change through time and in unique social contexts (De Fina, 2006). Identities may be expressed, not only at a collective level but also at an individual level.

Georgakopoulou (2002) notes that identities are not fixed properties or finished products rather are constructed or deconstructed. Thus, identities are produced and often imposed on individuals and groups through dominant discourse practices and ideologies (De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006). The approach to identity construction most relevant to the negotiation of identity by the BCG is identified by De Fina et al, 2006:10) as ‘footing, multivocality and intertextuality, i.e. “who is speaking “whose” words and what role are they taking in the “speech”? This means that a present speaker or writer is actually re-echoing the words of a previous speaker/writer (Goffman, 1981). This aptly captures the method of identity construction adopted by the BCG. The campaign writers frequently draw upon the words of the late Odumegwu Ojukwu, the founding leader of the defunct Biafran state. In the Ahiara Declaration of 1969, Ojukwu had said to the Igbos:

We have indeed come a long way. We were once Nigerians, today we are Biafrans. We are Biafrans because on 30th May, 1967, we finally said no to the evils and injustices in which Nigeria was steeped. Nigeria was made up of peoples and groups with very little in common... I stand before you tonight not to launch the Biafran Revolution, because it is already in existence... Every true Biafran must love Biafra; must have faith in Biafra and its people, and must strive for its greater unity. He must find his salvation here in Biafra. He must be prepared to work for Biafra, to stand up for Biafra and, if necessary, to die for Biafra. He must be prepared to defend the sovereignty of Biafra wherever and by whomsoever it is challenged... All Biafrans are brothers and sisters bound together by ties of geography, trade, inter-marriage and culture and their common misfortune in Nigeria and their present experience of the armed struggle.... (Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Ahiara village, 1969).

The main thrust of this speech was to establish the identity of the Biafran people and to maintain that Biafrans (or the Igbos) were no longer Nigerians. In the speech, Nigeria was constantly related to significant actions and character traits such as corruption and brutality and was referred to as ‘the enemy.’ The entire speech was a passionate enunciation of the basis for the revolution, not only as a Biafran Igbo revolution but also to be viewed as an effort to restore the dignity of the black man, who was said to be desperately in need of freedom from the dungeon of neo-colonialism and European capitalism. Hence, the Igbo blog writers and members of the online campaign groups have constantly re-iterated their resolve to assert their Biafran identity. In P7 below, the writer implies that Biafrans are not Nigerians and maintains that ‘the Biafran Revolution is indestructible and eternal.’

P7. Today in history, 40 years ago, General Ojukwu, The Legend of Biafra (apologies to Prof. Kalu Ogbaa) made the famous Ahiara Declaration... My brothers and sisters, last night I reread this document. And I felt very proud to be Igbo. I feel proud to be an Igbo-Biafran. And I am very proud of our fathers, uncles, mothers and all who contributed to the Biafran effort. But for the British, Russia and the Arab world who gave massive military and diplomatic support to the British contraption called Nigeria, Biafra would have survived and the Ahiara Declaration would have been used to build a modern model African State.
Some of the key issues raised in the Ojukwu declaration were the re-iteration of the common history of the Igbo people, their geographical identity and unique culture and economy as a people. Among the general historical experiences was their ‘common misfortune in Nigeria’ and their heroic struggle to be free. Geographically, the Igbo are located in the south-east of Nigeria with a natural boundary – the River Niger that hedged it off from the mid-west - the reason why they are often referred to a people ‘across the Niger.’ Their economy is basically commerce and agriculture and their language is Igbo. Language is a central reference for the cultural and political identities that derive from it, showing that language not only functions as a medium of communication but also that it renders existence (Abdeljelil, 2009). The Igbo language is the mother tongue and the ‘national language’ of the Biafrans. This language, which manifests both orally and orthographically, has many dialects, spoken in the current Igbo states. Igbo remains one of the three main languages in Nigeria today and have remained the pride and linguistic identity of the people.

An additional aspect of differentiating the view of the Igbo identity as highlighted above is the religious factor. The Igbo societies are overwhelmingly homogeneously Christians. This became more crucial in the online forums after the attempted bombing of the United State’s aircraft by a Nigerian Muslim youth on the 25th of December, 2010. Many of the blogs and posts vehemently dissociated themselves from the terrorist act and further re-affirmed Ojukwu’s earlier enunciation of the Christian Igbo identity. Ojukwu had said in his speech:

Our Biafran ancestors remained immune from the Islamic contagion. From the middle years of the last century Christianity was established in our land. In this way we came to be a predominantly Christian people. We came to stand out as a non-Muslim island in a raging Islamic sea. Throughout the period of the ill-fated Nigerian experiment, the Muslims hoped to infiltrate Biafra by peaceful means and quiet propaganda, but failed. Then the late Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduana of Sokoto tried, by political and economic blackmail and terrorism, to convert Biafrans settled in Northern Nigeria to Islam. His hope was that these Biafrans on dispersion would then carry Islam to Biafra and by so doing give the religion political control of the area... Biafra is one of the few African states untainted by Islam. Therefore, to militant Arabism, Biafra is a stumbling block to their plan for controlling the whole continent. This control is fast becoming manifest in the Organisation of African Unity...

It is not surprising therefore, that the BCG has consistently advocated a separate state by breaking up Nigeria along ethnic lines. This would make it easier to delineate the country on the basis of religion and ideologies that identify a particular people as Christians and the other as terrorists. P8, P9 and P10 below for instance, argue that unless Nigeria is broken up, the consequence of criminal activities committed by the Muslims of northern Nigerian will be borne by ‘innocent’ southern Christians.

P8. As long as we Biafrans continue to share a country with these Muslim hooligans we will continue to share in the shame of Nigeria. Public education is destroyed in Nigeria for one reason only, so that the money bags can continue to send their spoiled brat overseas for education... For those of Ndigbo and people of other nations stranded in Niger-area, make distinction of yourself. I am Biafran. (Ikenga)

P9. My question you all is this, Are guys prepared to live in the Islamic Republic of Nigeria. Personally I am not. Laugh this off if you like but is coming unless you join with the Biafran train right now. I was sick to my stomach reading that some people are celebrating this
American tragedy, shouting Ala Akbar. Yet to an outsider what will be reported is that Nigerians were celebrating the tragedy...

**P10.** The earlier Nigeria is broken up so the Christian Biafran can move on the better.

Hence, **P11** below makes a deliberate and passionate call to the Igbos and indeed, all Christian Nigerians to take part in the protest in order to let the world know that they are not party to terrorism; thus denounce the profiling of ‘Nigeria’ as a terrorist state. This particular post shares in its discursive contents, some of the argumentative traits of the Egyptian Facebook and Tweets from *Tahrir Square* that called for immediate action from the protesters.

**P11.** ... If there is any time for Christian Nigerians and Southern Democratic movement in Nigeria to protest against the behavior of Umar and the Islamic Republic of Northern Nigeria, this is the time for them to take to the streets and draw attention to the world that they are Christians and against terror activities in Nigeria, even if it is to protest against clustering them together with terrorist North. I hope they do, otherwise the profile sticks; the world, particularly Western Europe will continue to profile all Nigerians as potential terrorist. ... Nigerians cannot continue to hope for change, hoping for another self centered, agenda-oriented Hausa man or persons to make the change when they have the power and the opportunity to change Nigeria, now is the time, now or never. It is called people's power...Iranians are doing it ... Hail Biafra (*waypoint1Biafra, supreme advocate*)

Other blogs and posts have further justified a radical approach to the corporate existence of Nigeria, which in this context is viewed as very risky. The continual restricting of Nigeria into a unified socio-political and economic entity forcibly merges the Muslims and Christians, who share nothing in common; thus, endangers the Igbo collective psyche and social norms. This is viewed as jeopardizing not only the Igbo cultural identity but also contravenes the Igbo principles of social existence contained in the Biafran *Ahiara Declaration*. **P12** below refers to the principles that formed the European Union (EU), where independent nations exist as separate people, yet agree to unite on certain social and economic principles. The writer hence, recommends similar arrangement for Nigeria and further argues that the present ‘one’ Nigeria, merely forces different, unrelated people to forget ‘who they are.’

**P12.** I am a Nigerian from Ikwerre, just like Wilson Churchill is a European from England. Therefore, let us restructure Nigeria on ethnic basis and let all the groups have equal rights, privileges and opportunities and respect one another as peoples of diverse and different nationalities who have discussed and agreed to be in one political and co-ordinate sphere called Nigeria. This pluralist recommendation is akin to the EU with different and diverse ethnic groups who have political, social and economic freedoms, but agreed to meet as equals in EU. Thinking of forcing every ethnic nation in Nigeria to forget who they are in order to become Nigeria, is like forcing the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain etc into one country. If they did not discuss and agree on that formation, who will rule who and how? (Dibia, Abuja).

To further prove their point, some post writers had cited the opinion of some Muslim leaders who had supported the breaking up of Nigeria as the way to peace. For example, the late Muamar Ghadafi of Libya had made this recommendation long ago without any positive outcome (**P17** and **P18**). The two posts are examples of online journalism, a strategy applied by the campaigners to speak through the voice of others; thus, making stronger, their own point.
P17. Divide Nigeria like Pakistan and India-Ghadafi
They have them talking about dissecting Nigeria to two, the South and the North, an experiment gone bad by the British. Here are the calls from even the once most known terrorist head of state of Libya...Gaddafi wants Nigeria divided into two-South and the North, just like Pakistan and India. (waypoint1)

P18. Decentralize Nigeria now, Muslim Group tells FG
The President General of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat of Nigeria, Dr. Moshood Adenrele Fashola, has said if the division of Nigeria is what will solve the restiveness and increasing spate of killings in the country; the Federal Government should decentralize the country. The head of the strong Islamic group, who addressed a press briefing in Lagos on Wednesday to herald the group’s 6th anniversary, said the delay in convening a sovereign national conference to negotiate a true federalism for the country was responsible for the woes and calamity happening in the country...

While the points raised in P17 and P18, are to be viewed as the position of a Muslim youth group, the writer points out that it is in fact, the opinion of some other Muslims. Hence, the call for breaking up of Nigeria is not only the opinion of the Christian Igbos but also the idea of some sections of African Moslems, including ‘even the most known terrorist head of state of Libya’ (P17).

In re-affirming the collective identity of the Biafran Igbos, certain discursive forms have frequently occurred in the blogs and discussion forums. These include the inclusive pronominal ‘we,’ the possessive pronoun ‘us’ and the possessive adjective ‘our.’ Words and phrases, such as ‘Biafrans’ (e.g. P13) or ‘we Biafrans’ (e.g. P8), ‘my brothers and sisters’ (e.g. P7), ‘Ndigbo’ (i.e. Igbos, e.g. P8) etc, have also been used to express in-group sentiments. The ‘we’ and ‘us’ pronouns function more in this context as a re-enactment of collective history and identity, rather than a mere reflection of compliment or solidarity. Ojukwu, in his declaration had used ‘we’ consistently to reflect oneness, for instance, he wrote: ‘we have indeed come a long way. We were once Nigerians, today we are Biafrans. We are Biafrans because on 30th May, 1967, we finally said no to the evils and injustices in which Nigeria was steeped.’

Having identified the ‘Biafrans’ as Igbos and Christians, the writer of P13 characterizes them as being ‘free’ and went on to assert the ‘we’ inclusive word in order to assert their collective identity as none Nigerians. He says passionately: ‘we are forced to carry Nigerian passport, we have no part in terrorism, we are Christians, we are pro Judio, we are free people, we are Igbo, we are Biafrans.’ By asserting and emphasizing the Igbo ethnic mentality, he re-echoes Ojukwu’s very words and at the same time assumes the role of the speaker for the rest of the Igbos, who could not speak for themselves. The implication of urging Washington to listen to Biafrans was to avoid the mistaken unilateral characterization or profiling of Nigeria as a terrorist nation. As far as the BCG is concerned, Biafrans still form a separate Christian nation, though ‘forced’ to carry the Nigerian passport.

Thus, the question of identity for the Igbos touches on key issues of survival and self-determination, which constantly reminds them of Biafra. The Biafran revolution has been their tallest ambition in an attempt to define themselves as a people. To most of the blog
writers and participants in Nigera-Biafra World online forum, Biafra is never a failed state and they believe it is a dream that will still come true; this is clearly expressed in P6.

Social Interaction and Language Structure

According to Herring (2001) text-based asynchronous CMD constitutes social practice in itself and is an effective way to ‘do’ interactional work, because it enables users to choose their words with care and reveals less of their doubts and insecurities. However, in the BCG context, social interaction enables participants to engage in a form of social activism. In this case, participants in the forums neither hide their feelings nor conceal their insecurities. In order to further to assert their identity they have questioned the relationship between MASSOB and other campaign groups and the Nigerian government as well as the welfare of an average Igbo in the country. This has formed the basis of their social interaction in the forums.

And to effectively carried out ‘interactional work’ in the forums, the writers have adopted language strategies that marks them off as an ethnic group, especially some forms of code-switching, coinages, proverbs and social labels that are unique to the Igbos are clearly used. In the BCG forums, however, most of the posts reflect features of Standard American or British English. This is not surprising since most of the Biafra online campaigners live in Europe and North America. Words are carefully chosen and features that betray spoken language are highly minimized. In most of the posts, formal English language forms are used in a supposed informal situation, even in arguments. Expressions such as ‘truth is the greatest vindicator and I am on the side of truth, so I am not deterred with false accusation’ (P3) and a response like ‘I made my correspondence with the right person and have no apologies for that...’ (P4) sound rather formal and bookish. The formality of language use in the BCG forums is attributable not only to the fact that written communication tends to be more formal than spoken but also due to the overriding theme and context of interaction.

In the BCG websites and forums, English is used with occasional switch to Igbo mainly in the openings and closings of messages. It is also used as ethnic labels, slogans and generic names. Occasionally, they are used to describe God, or to express proverbs/local idioms. An ethnic label like ‘Ndigbo’ (or NdIgbo) is used as a sign of solidarity or ethnic identification.

There are three types of openings illustrated in the samples below. First, is the group solidarity address, e.g. ‘Umu Biafra’ (P34) (Biafrans or children of Biafra). This is similar to ‘Umu Igbo’ (P66) (Igbos or children of the Igbo). Second, is greeting e.g. ‘Igbo mma mma nu’ (P64). (This does not have a direct English equivalent but stands for ‘Igbo I greet you’). The third form of opening is divided into formal address, e.g. ‘Mazi Ray’ (Mr. Ray) (P67) and informal address, e.g. Nwanna Dave (P65) (my brother Dave). Most of the posts begin informally with the addressee’s first name, especially where a post is a comment to a previous message by a member of the forum. Codeswitching in these examples reinforces cultural meaning and aesthetic of the local language. The greeting form in P64 captures a local thought which lacks a direct English counterpart, thereby restoring a sense of tradition of the Igbo.
About 85% of the posts end with the slogan ‘Hail Biafra,’ sometimes with an accompanying emoticon (smiley face) as in P68 or showing disgust/surprise as in P69. A few others end with ‘In Aburi we stand,’ or ‘Biafra for life.’ P73 below ends with a slogan ‘Igbo gadi’ (long live Igbo). But significantly, a few others end with proverbs or local idioms that necessitate codeswitching, especially where the pragmatics of the local expression becomes crucial. For example, ‘tufiakwa’ in P59 cannot possibly be rendered in English and is better said in Igbo. This kind of expression is used to express extreme disgust, equivalent to ‘God forbid!’

P59. Those who blindlessly follow any individual no matter who they are or place individuals above any nation will end up with eggs on their faces - TUFIAKWA!!!!

P68. Hail Biafra😊😊

P70 below ends with a proverb ‘ofu onye ana asu abia go’ (one person does not say ‘welcome all.’) This proverb implies that one person does not take a decision for everyone. A similar closing/sign off is in P71, which says ‘udo ga adi.’ Though a local adage that simply means, ‘there will be peace,’ it is not usually said in English, even when the speaker is speaking English as the primary code. This means that ‘udo ga adi’ is traditionally heavier than ‘there will be peace.’ In the Biafran discourse context, this expression envisions the hope for the Biafra actualization. P28, ends with a prayer ‘Chukwu gozie Igbo’ (i.e. God bless Igbo), ‘Chukwu gozie New Biafra’ (i.e. God bless the new Biafra). God is described as ‘Ama ama amasi amasi’ (the Omniscient). In this context, prayer in the local language is probably perceived as more potent than prayer in English. Also the attribute of God as ‘omniscient’ is perhaps not as weighty as the Igbo equivalent which literally means ‘the knower, whose knowledge never ends.’

P28. But as usual our God “AMA AMA AMASI AMASI” has and will continue to confound them! Chukwu gozie Igbo, Chukwu gozie New Biafra...

P70. Feel me? Ofu onye ana asu abia go – (Ednut Igbo-American, posted April 23, 2007 07:40 PM)
P71. Udo ga adi
   (posted April 29, 2007 12:06 AM).

‘Nwa Asaba’ (son of Asaba) in P72 is used as a sign off, just as it may as well serve as an opening if someone is responding to this particular post (e.g. P65). Again, ‘Nwa Asaba’ is not usually rendered in English during an Igbo traditional discourse. So, certain expressions are better said in the local code, otherwise some levels of meaning or cultures will be lost in an attempt to render them in English.

Other forms of codeswitching are still within sentence boundaries but are part of the content of the message. In P42 for example ‘ozo emena my people’ (line 4) expresses a wish, i.e. ‘may it never happen again,’ referring to the horrors of the civil war. ‘Ozo emena’ is often used as a personal name among the Igbos, often in families that had experienced deaths or tragedies soon before the birth of a child. This local expression better expresses the Igbo
psychology, especially their traditional sense of tragedy and loss. The writer of P42 counsels against the repeat of the Biafra war in their quest for self determination. He further supports his argument with an adage ‘umunna bu ike,’ (line 5), meaning ‘brotherhood is power’ or ‘united we stand.’ He believes that division among the various campaign groups inevitably endangers the Biafran course. There have been evidences of friction and fragmentation among the various campaign groups.

P42. I'm glad Biafra Nigeria world message board has come into existence. I am a Biafran through and through; it is time something is done to free people like Ralph who have the bottle to say things everyone wants to say. But no matter what, let's not go back to those horrible thirty months of hell. Ozo emena my people, but we could overcome through a peaceful way like Ralph, but we also should remember that umunna bu ike united we stand and divided we fall like we did the last time around. (Frank O, posted August 02, 2007 04:12 PM)

A similar instance of codeswitching, illustrating culture-specific meaning has been examined in P34 above, where the writer switches to the local code to render a war song, which says: ‘Orula mgbe anyi ji awa anya! Onye ujo abiala nga anyi na-awa anya.’ (It is time to act like warriors; the fearful should not approach when we act like warriors). This song functions as a call to defend the Igbo nation against its enemies. This post was among several others that responded to the report of an alleged fish poisoning that was said to be targeted at the Igbo population some few years ago.

Similar to codeswitching, are coinages that are another instance of language use in the BCG forums. This however includes peculiar Nigerian usages. There are a very few instances of this in the corpus and are worth mentioning here. In P54 below, for example, there is a code switch e.g. ‘if you must speak for oha...’ (line 2). (‘Oha’ in Igbo means ‘the majority’ or ‘everyone’). In line 4, there is a coinage adapted from ‘oha’, i.e. ‘ohacracy’ derived from ‘democracy.’ The Biafran brand of democracy, which the writer defines as ‘majority’ rule is better captured in the Igbo-based coinage ‘ohacracy,’ which is indeed the true democracy. It is the rule by everyone (see Chiluwa, 2012d).

P54. I care that only three people based in Chicago are pretending to speak for the Igbo nation. Another definition of democracy is Majority Rule. If you must speak for Oha, it is only reasonable to expect that you enjoy the backing of the majority of oha especially when you are expostulating on Ohacracy. If you scroll up you will read where Oha-ka addressed the Igbo nation as a nation of cowards...

Language and social interaction in the above sample not only express the Igbo psyche, they also identify them as a people and further assert their socio-cultural identity.

Conclusion

This study therefore concludes, (as has been illustrated in the research) that CMC or online discourse is a key site for social interaction, and interestingly in recent times, for doing social activism as well as civic engagement. Text based asynchronous messages affords interactants the opportunity to send messages and get feedbacks at a later date. Members of any particular
forum or online community can participate in any topic of interest; be it social, business or professional. As we have illustrated in this chapter, the BCG as a virtual community brings their members together to negotiate and assert their ethnic identity in the Nigerian state. They also use the online platform to project their need to exist as an independent nation, which is the ultimate aim of the identity negotiation.

References


About the Author
INNOCENT CHILUWA is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Communication Studies and Head, Department of Languages, Covenant University, OTA. His research interest focuses on (Critical) Discourse Studies and Pragmatics of ideology, identity, social crisis/protest, conflict and activism in (new) media and computer-mediated communications, political and religious discourses. He has published scientific articles in Discourse & Society (Sage), Discourse Studies (Sage), Discourse & Communication (Sage), Journal of Multicultural Discourses (Routledge), Journal of Language and Politics (John Benjamins), Pragmatics and Society (John Benjamins) Africa Toda (Indiana), English Today (Cambridge), English World-Wide (John Benjamins), etc. He is the author of Labeling and Ideology in the Press: a Corpus-based Critical Discourse Study of the Niger Delta Crisis (Peter Lang); Language in the News: mediating sociopolitical Crises in Nigeria (Peter Lang) and a co-editor of Computer-Mediated Discourse in Africa (Nova Publishers, New York). He is the editor, Covenant Journal of Language Studies. (email: innocent.chiluwa@covenantuniversity.edu.ng or ichiluwa@gmail.com)