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LANGUAGE AND ETHNIC SENTIMENTS IN READERS' COMMENTS ON FACEBOOK PAGES OF SELECTED SOCIO-CULTURAL GROUPS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:
Many studies exist which explore the roles of language in national development and unity and those that investigate patterns of self-assertiveness among ethnic groups characterised by ethnolinguistic vitality. However, patterns of ideological conflicts and solidarity based on ethnic affiliations on Facebook have been under-researched. The present study relies on readers' responses to Facebook comments on issues of national interest such as politics and economy to determine the role of language and ethnicity in solidarity formations in Nigeria. Data for this work was collected on the Facebook pages of some socio-cultural groups in Nigeria. Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory and its revised standard version was adopted as the theory for the analysis. The study revealed that ethnic bias reflects in the comments and response of people on Facebook. The study also shows that posts on the Facebook pages of MASOB and MEND generate more ethnic sentiments than other groups. The use of linguistics features such as pronouns, and deictic pronouns, qualifiers, implicatures, naming and reference, invective/insults, and tribal references, are evident in the Facebook comments. They are used for ethnic inclusion and exclusion on Facebook.

Keywords: ethnic sentiment, ethnolinguistic identity theory, readers' responses, Facebook, socio-cultural

1.   Introduction

Language plays pivotal role in any human society. The functionality of language depends on its usage. The choice of words and the context of usage determine the effect on the people. Language can be used to unite and also be used to disintegrate people. Kelma (1971:21) cited in (Gardeazabal, 2011) opines that language can be an instrument to unify people and also be used to separate people. The number of languages and ethnic groups in society may determine the tendency of the segregation caused by language and ethnic

loyalty. Nigeria is a plural society with several languages and ethnic groups. At the moment, English is used as a language of wider communication (LWC) in the country, particularly for those who are literate in the language (about 39% based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics). Nigerian Pidgin serves a similar purpose for the majority of the people who are non-literate in English but can speak pidgin. Given the role of English as a LWC, literate people of different languages interact without much linguistic barrier. The English language facilitates communication. However, ethnic differences are still evident in the reactions and comments of people in different discourses which sometimes may lead to conflict and separation. Conflicts erupt because differences between social groups tend to create feelings of threat, the uncertainty of status, fear, and rivalry (Igboanusi & Peter, 2005). As Igboanusi (2017) has argued, this kind of conflict may not be motivated by language differences, but by other social factors such as competition for limited resources and power, as well as by religious ideologies.

Language and ethnicity cannot be separated. Following Obeng and Adegbija (1999), language is seen as the storehouse of ethnicity. This informs the kinship reference seen in the use of 'my brother' or 'my sister' in addressing someone that comes from the same ethnic group as the speaker. For example, it is in common place to see an Ibo man referring to another Ibo man as 'my brother'. However, language is also used to exclude others that do not belong to the same ethnic group. It is also used to make derogatory references and discriminate. It can be used to insult, relegate, label, name, and also separate others. Obeng and Adegbija (1999) state that the togetherness of the in-groups who had identical habits and ethnicity led to the exclusion of people who were linguistically and ethnically different. Obeng and Adegbija explain further that exclusionism often led to various degrees of indifference and xenophobia as well as mild amusement to indifference and in extreme cases, to hostility towards other ethnic and linguistic groups. This hostility is observable in the readers' comments on Facebook. The linguistic sentiment is seen in the choice of words of an individual when referring to others outside his/her group. This sentiment is also seen in reference to ethnic groups. The use of language to refer to others in a derogative manner or exclude them may be referred to as ethnic sentiment.

A socio-cultural group is a group of people based on social relations, such as race, socioeconomic, gender, language, etc. Socio-cultural groups in Nigeria may be said to

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have emerged based on ethnic and linguistic relations. They usually have common ground for agitation. We have socio-cultural groups from the north, south, and west. From the southwest, we have such groups as Odua People's Congress (OPC), Agbekoya, Yoruba council of elders, etc. From the north, we have such groups as Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Northern Youth Forum (NYF), Arewa People's Congress (APC), etc. From the South and the Niger Delta states, we have such groups as Niger Delta Avenger, Movement for the emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), etc. It is important to state at this juncture that the Niger delta regions have the highest number of socio-cultural groups that are agitating for resource control. This is not unconnected with the fact that the mainstream of the economy of the country is from the region and the region has been neglected for long by successive governments. There are different groups in the region clamouring for resource control and even secession. However, other regions also have one reason or the other to agitate through their different groups. Facebook remains one of the platforms the groups are exploring.

Facebook has turned to be a public sphere where issues of national interest are debated. Globally, Facebook is a platform where faceless (people who have never met before) people meet and interact meaningfully. Ayantayo and Akintola (2017) state that almost every incident in the country (Nigeria) is reported on social media such as Facebook. Discourse on Facebook attracts responses from every part of the country, irrespective of ethnic affiliation. Responses may be for or against the post on politics, economy, or security, depending on individual prejudice. Faceless friends now discuss to agree and disagree on any issue of interest. Users disagree and express sentiment by discriminating against others who are not within their ethnic 'in-group'. Ethnically, language is used on Facebook to create in- and out-group to reflect solidarity.

Many studies explore the roles of language in national development and unity (for example, Emeka-Nwobia 2015; Danladi 2013; Obiegbu 2015) and those that investigated patterns of self-assertiveness among ethnic groups characterised by ethnolinguistic vitality (e.g. Nkadimeng and Makalela 2015; Garri and Mugaddam 2015; and Chew 2014). Kamran and Mansoor (2017), and Dressler and Dressler (2016) investigate language use with ethnolinguistic colourations on Facebook. Similarly, Zhou (2017), Shohamy (2006), and Thomas (2015) focus on the role of ideology in language conflict. However, patterns of ideological conflicts and solidarity based on ethnic affiliations have

been under-researched. It is common to see ethnic affiliation and segregation in Facebook comments among Facebook users. Nigeria, being a multi-ethnic society, is facing a different ethnic crises. Thus, the role of social media in generating ethnic conflict cannot be underrated. Consequently, it is imperative to prevent an ethnic characterized conflict that may emanate from Facebook communication. The present study, therefore, relies on readers' responses to Facebook comments on national issues to determine the role of language and ethnicity in solidarity formations in Nigeria. We believed that the contribution of this study will help to prevent ethnic conflict and expand the frontier of linguistic analysis of social media language. To achieve these, the paper is premised on the following research questions: What are the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of ethnicity in Facebook communication? How do the linguistics and sociolinguistics feature express ethnic affiliation? What are the intercultural conflicts that reflect in the use of language on Facebook by Nigerians? To answer these questions, the paper adopts Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT) and its revised standard version. The theory is relevant because of its resourcefulness in identifying in and out-group in human interactions. The research is timely considering the fragile nature of the ethnic relations in the country at the moment based on political sentiments and resources control agitation. It will help to address the use of language to discriminate against 'out-groups', especially on Facebook.

2. Review of relevant literature

While working on the politics of language, identity construction, and state-building that divided Sudan into two states, Garri (2016) explores the politics of language, identity construction, and state-building that the pre- and post-colonial regimes adopted in Sudan to address the debated problems of language, identity and state-building. The study discovers that under both regimes, there are two distinct policies that had a knock-off effect on the separation of South Sudan from Sudan. The two policies include; the sustenance of the southern isolated divide and rule ideologies and the adoption of Arabicisation policies to exterminate the native languages in South Sudan. The study revealed that the south Sudanese resisted the policies and embraced separation from Sudan because they believed that the North Sudanese power-wielding elites were deliberately pushing them to separate. The findings are relevant to show various ways of measuring linguistic and ideological polarisation. Adekanmi (2009) examines language

discrimination in the Federal civil service, Ibadan. She elucidates discrimination in Nigeria labour setting vis-a-vis its causes and effects. The uniqueness of her thesis is seen in its trial blazing in the area of advocacy for fairness concerning the treatment of employees in the Nigerian workplaces, irrespective of their linguistic or ethnic affiliation, and strict monitoring of workplaces in Nigeria to ensure that workers in such workplaces are not maltreated as a result of their language or ethnic origin.

Babatola (2015) adopts Ethno-linguistic Identity theory to investigate language and ethnic-based discrimination in Ibadan. The study reveals that there are language and ethnic-based discrimination in securing accommodation within the Ibadan metropolis. Anthony et al. (2013) investigate the importance of ethnicity in the hiring process in France, using three different French ethnic identity, namely; French-sounding names, North African-sounding names, and foreign-sounding names and provides a novel test for statistical discrimination. The study shows that within both male and female groups, all non-French applicants are equally discriminated against when compared to French applicants who reveal that racial discrimination in employment is directed against members of non-majority ethnic groups, and highlights the importance of favouritism for in-group members.

Ndonye (2014) studies social media, ethnic hatred, and peace journalism in the use of Twitter and Facebook use in Kenya to know the incidences that account for ethnic hatred on the two media in Kenya. The study also determines the influence of ethnic hatred on peace journalism in Kenya. The study suggests that the root cause of ethnic hatred such as historical injustices, lack of media objectivity in coverage, politics based on ethnic blocks be addressed, and also that all social media pages that promote ethnic hatred be closed down. Dressler and Dresser (2016) examine one teen's identity positioning through her Facebook posts from two separate study abroad experiences in Germany. The study reveals that the teen used Facebook posts to position herself as a German-English bilingual and a member of an imagined community of German-English bilinguals by making a choice on which language(s) to use, reporting her linguistic successes and challenges, and indicating growing language awareness. Kamran and Mansoor (2017) examine the written comments of Pakistani students on the official Facebook sites of the public and private sector universities to study their English language skills and social networking systems and their implications for language policy in education. The study reveals the dominant use of English and a significant difference between public and

private sector students in their preference to use English. The result of the study shows that there is the issue of language discrimination between students of public and private sector universities.

The above reviewed works are relevant to the present research. Gari (2016) examines discrimination motivated by the authority, Adekanmi (2009), Babatola (2015), and Anthony et al. identify discrimination at workplace. Ndonye (2014), Dressler and Dresser (2016) and Kamran and Mansoor (2017) investigate discrimination in the media and Facebook. They provide insight into the study of discrimination at various levels of human interaction. The studies provide a foundation on which Language and ethnic sentiments in Nigeria can be investigated with evidence from responses to comments on Facebook**.** Social media, of which Facebook is one, has become another speech community where people interact on different issues. The interaction on social media cuts across cultures and different backgrounds. It allows for discussion of different ideas, such as politics, economy, education, sports, and even agriculture. In these discussions, the choice of words by discussants reflects their tribal and ethnic affiliation in most cases. Language of hatred against one another is shown on social media. Previous works are silent about these. The dearth of this in the academics informs the present work with the hope to identify and analyse linguistics features that promote ethnic sentiment on Facebook. This will be useful to promote harmony among Facebook users and researchers.

3.   Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT) and its revised standard version as the anchor theory. The theory is a social psychological approach proposed by Giles and Johnson (1981). According to Oakes (2001), it is an extension of Social Identity Theory (SIT). ELIT and SIT are conditioned on the notion of the 'other' as opposed to the 'self'. ELIT is similar to SIT in its fundamental principles of belongingness. The principles include social categorization, social identity, social comparison, and psychological distinctiveness which are relevant to enhance individuals' self-esteem. The theories emphasis the notion of 'self' and 'others' identity. It harps on the segmentation of 'self' and 'others' in the society, which explains the inclusion and exclusion that represent a contest between groups and institutions within the society. Giles and Johnson

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(1981) opine 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. ELIT stresses the feeling of 'us' which reflects in the use of language. This explains the fact that people are more likely to use the language of the group they belong to and also use the same language to exclude others that do not belong to their group.

An extension of this is the Convergence and divergence theory that originated in the Accommodation theory propounded by Giles (1973). 'Convergence' is a method whereby individuals adapt to the communication patterns of each other during interaction (Giles and Coupland, 1991). It suggests that speakers converge to belong and integrate to a certain group or individual. In contrast, divergence refers to how speakers accentuate their verbal and non-verbal differences to distinguish themselves from others. It follows that whereas convergence enhances solidarity with the in-group, divergence accentuates difference with the out-group. The relationship does not necessarily imply total assimilation as in the original formulation of ELIT but recognises intermediate states of acculturation where both dominant and minority identities are retained (Oakes, 2000).

On Facebook (our source of data), there are different people with tribal and ethnic affiliations interacting on different issues. Their ethnic background is usually reflected in their comments which sometimes reflect hatred towards others. There are also elements of ethnic solidarity noticeable in their choice of words. The notion of in and out-group is easily noticed. This makes ELIT a relevant and suitable theory for this work because it recognizes and emphasizes that people segregate others that do not belong to their group using language as an instrument and comfortably associate with people they feel belong to their group.

4.   Methodology

This research combines quantitative with the textual analytical methods. Textual analytical research means that data for analysis are sourced only from the text(s) and interpreted in accordance with how the data are used in the texts where they are selected. Quantitative is adopted to show the frequency of the ethnic sentiment in the comments on the Facebook page of the selected socio-cultural groups.
Readers' responses constitute the data for this research. Data were collected from the Facebook pages of four socio-cultural groups in Nigeria. The socio-cultural groups

include Odua People's Congress (OPC), Arewa people's congress (APC), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), and Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). These socio-cultural groups give even representation to the major ethnic groups in the country, hence, the choice of their Facebook page for data collection. OPC is a Yoruba nationalist organisation in Nigeria and neighbouring countries where Yoruba is spoken. It was founded by Chief Frederick Fasheun. The MASSOB is a secessionist movement in Nigeria associated with Igbo nationalism, led by Ralp Uwazuruike. APC is a group in Northern Nigeria established to protect the interest of the Hausa/Fulani, chaired by retired captain Sagir Muhammed. MEND is one of the largest militant groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The group is headed by Chief Henry Okah and has been active since 2004 till date. MEND and MASSOB may be said to have represented the eastern part of the country. This is so because the region has been bedevilled with agitation for resource control which makes the region exposed to several groups. It is important to state that the pages have an uneven number of comments. However, we make effort to sample 100 comments from each page, making our sampled data totalling 400 comments. The number of comments that generate ethnic sentiments also varied considerably base on the topic of discussion. We sampled posts that discussed issues of national interest. For this study, 22 comments were purposively selected and discussed to show different ethnic sentiment strategies used in the discourse. However, the study presents statistical data of the comments that reflect evidence of ethnic sentiment to show the frequency of occurrence according to the socio-cultural group selected. Grammatical expressions such as; lexis, phrases, clauses, and sentences in the data are studied within their context of usage to identify convergence and divergence.

5.   Data presentation and analysis

As earlier mentioned, 400 comments were sampled from four (4) socio-cultural groups. 100 comments were sampled from each Facebook page of the selected socio-cultural groups. The table below shows the occurrence of evidence of ethnic sentiment in the sampled comments.

Table 1: showing the occurrence of evidence of ethnic sentiment in readers' comment on Facebook

S/N	Socio-cultural group	Number of comment	Occurrence of ethnic	Percentage

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		sampled	sentiment	
1	MASSOB	100	73	30.4 %
2	MEND	100	68	28.3 %
3	APC	100	57	23.8 %
4	OPC	100	42	17.5 %
	Total	400	240	100%

As shown in the table, out of the 400 comments sampled, 240 reflect ethnic sentiment through different strategies. Four socio-cultural groups were sampled. MASSOB takes the preponderance of the total sampled with 73 shreds of evidence of ethnic sentiments out of 240, representing 30.4%. This shows that the socio-cultural group posts more on issues that generate sentiments. It is strictly followed by MEND with 68 pieces of evidence out of 240 representing 28.3%. The two socio-cultural groups are from the eastern bloc of the country. The bloc is known for its agitation for resource control and secession. As said earlier, their agitation is connected to the fact that the major source of revenue for the country comes from the region and the region has been neglected by successive governments in terms of infrastructural development. This informs the reason for their preponderance in terms of evidence of ethnic sentiment in the comment on their posts. Most of the posts on their pages bothered on resource control and secession. The region is not only feeling neglected but also cheated and desired to secede from the country. To this end, the region hates other regions of the country and even referred to the country as a **zoo** in most of their posts. From the foregoing, we can infer that the bloc generates more ethnic sentiment than other regions in their posts on Facebook because they are being cheated. APC takes the third position with 57 data of 240 representing 23.8%. This is also connected to the fact that the region it represented (north) is the incumbent at the federal level and has been accused of self-centeredness. Other regions of the country believe that the region is the most backward despite their longest stay in power. Most of the posts on their page reflect defence for being in power and the fact that they are not backward as insinuated. We can also infer their posts generated ethnic sentiment because of their perceived 'egocentricity'. Finally, OPC has 42 data representing 17.5% of 240 data. Most of the posts on their page are about the performance and celebration of the group and members. The comments are mainly congratulatory messages to celebrants. It is however not devoid of ethnic sentiments. This shows that the group does not give room for many sentimental posts on Facebook. The data, therefore, reflects that the OPC and APC generate fewer ethnic sentiment posts

compared to MASSOB and MEND on Facebook. This is because every region in the country has different reasons to be angry and the 'cheating' in the country is perpetrated by leaders which spread across regions in the country and not by ethnic groups.

Subsequently, we shall discuss the strategies used in generating sentiment with examples from the comments. To achieve this, we identify, classify and discuss the linguistic features used for the strategies. This study examines the contexts that make these strategies obvious. Likewise, the paper takes note of other words in the same environment that help to generate in and out-group and the intention of the writer.

5.1 Tribal reference

Nigeria is ethnically polarized with both major and small ethnic groups. Among these are Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani, Idoma, Efik, Ibibio, Jukun, etc**.** indigenes of these groups are loyal to their groups. Nobody desires their group to be presented negatively. Major ethnic groups are usually recognized at the expense of the minor groups. The major ethnic groups in Nigeria include; Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Ijaw, Fulani, Tiv. Kanuri, and Ibibio.

In the comment box, these ethnic groups are well represented and their representatives also made their comments. In the comments, there are pieces of evidence of ethnic inclusion and exclusion. The sociolinguistic variable identified here is an ethnic reference. Without mincing words, readers give a direct attack on the ethnic group they wish to attack by mentioning the ethnic's name. The public self-image of those ethnic groups was attacked without consideration. The following excerpts are examples from Facebook comments that promote ethnic sentiment.

1. *The **Yoruba** built the seaports in Lagos, but in 1975, Muritala muhammad, a **fulani** through a military decree took the shoreline...*
2. ***Northernans Hausa/Fulani** and **Southwest Yoruba** in Nigeria are evil, wicked, thieves, and self-centered animals. They are not worthy to stay with anybody in the world. The ultimate thing to do is to disintegrate zoo (sic) called Nigeria.*
3. *Thank God that **Igbo** people have opened their eyes through Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. I wonder who is going to open **Hausa** people's eyes*

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Excerpt 1 is a comment from a Yoruba man commenting on the legacy of the Yoruba people in Nigeria. There was a post by the OPC on the contribution of each region to the development of the country. A Hausa man had condemned the post and described the post as a fallacy. In a swift response, a Yoruba man responded with a tribal reference to show sentiment between the two sects concerned. The response shows that the Yoruba while in power contributed to the infrastructural development of the country. However, Fulani is mentioned as an apposition to Muritala Muhammad in the response. Mentioning Fulani here is to show divergence. The decision to mention the ethnic name is to discriminate against the ethnic group. This is because while in power, an individual is not meant to represent himself/herself, neither is he/she expected to represent his/her ethnic group but the whole country. The decision to mention the ethnic names is a way to foreground the 'bad' of the group. On the same post, an easterner intervened and derogatorily referred to Hausa and Yoruba. The writer could just use other words such as pronouns to represent them or mention the name of the individual that is referred to as '*evil, wicked, thieves and self-centered animals*' because the entire ethnic group could not have perpetrated 'evil' and be wicked at the same time. Instead of this, the writer deliberately mentioned the ethnic names and even their region. The two ethnic groups are used as the agent/actor in the sentence. This foregrounds the name of the two ethnic groups. The writer presents the whole ethnic group as **wicked, thieves, and self-centered** to discriminate against them in the society**.** This is a stereotype against the ethnic groups mentioned. It is often said that there is no absolutely bad ethnic groups. This is discriminatory and shows hatred towards the group. This also reveals the fragile nature of the ethnic relations in the country. It also shows the level of mistrust among the ethnic groups which is seriously threatening the existing cohabitation.

In excerpt 3, there are two ethnic names mentioned. The Igbo and the Hausa. The writer was commenting on the activities of the IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu. The writer saw him as eye-opener, a liberator. To the writer, the Hausa are yet to be liberated. This is sentimental because the argument is baseless. There is no evidence to substantiate the claim. At least, Hausa is one of the major ethnic groups in the country. The writer mentioned the two ethnic groups to include himself in one group and exclude himself in the other.

Ethnic name referencing is used here to solicit ethnic solidarity and also to show segregation. We can easily see evidence of convergence and divergence in the comments as members of different ethnic groups adopted accusation, abuse, Cursing, and name-calling as seen in the above excerpts to refer to other groups. The ethnic group of individuals that made comments is easily identified based on their ethnic reference choice. The social implication of this is obvious. Such comments are capable of generating ethnic conflict in society as people of different ethnic affiliations now perceive one another as enemies. Sentimental comments on Facebook may reflect in the social lives of the people. Interaction and accommodation may be affected if care is not taken as people breed hatred towards one another. This type of comment is capable of influencing the way an individual relates to society, this may be so as the millennium age is greatly influenced by happenings in the digital world.

5.2 Implicature

Chiluwa (2008) defines implicature as the component of the speaker's meaning that constitutes an aspect of what is meant without necessarily being part of what is said. Akintola and Ayantayo (2016) note that Implicature is a pragmatic aspect of the meaning of an utterance, produced in a specific context that is shared by the speaker/hearer. Some comments that do not require further interrogation even when the writer and readers do not share the same background knowledge.

On the Facebook page of OPC and MEND, the issue of natural resources in Nigeria and their distribution among different sections of the country are being discussed. This discussion also attracts different comments. One of the commenters as seen in excerpt 4 insinuates that his/her ethnic group has better natural resources than others. The commenter in excerpt 5 also boasts of his/her nation which is alien to the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria. There are elements of implicature in the responses which promote ethnic sentiment.

4. *Yoruba land is very sweet.* **All tribe (sic) may come and join us here**.
5. *Make ona tell them about our* **new nation** *'NAIJA DELTA COUNTRY'* **the homes of renewable resourcse (sic)**

In excerpt 4, the writer sees his ethnic group as having good natural resources. The second sentence in the excerpts implicates that other ethnic groups do not have good land. That the land is 'very sweet' according to the writer, implicates that there is relative peace in the Yoruba land. This can be inferred from the background knowledge that both the northern and the eastern parts of the country are faced with terrorist attacks and militants. In the north, there is the menace of Boko haram and the Fulani herdsmen. In the eastern part, there is the trouble of Niger Delta militants. This informs the reason the writer is saying that the Yoruba land is 'sweet'. He is saying this, to present other ethnic groups as crisis-prone areas. This is sentimental because security issue is a national issue and should not be seen as if it is peculiar to a particular ethnic group. The use of land and sweet is symbolic and metaphoric to indicate peace in the region.

Excerpt 5 also aligns with this assertion. The commenter is commenting on the issue of the Niger Delta resources. With the background knowledge, one knows that most of the crude oil is got from the eastern part of the country. The writer sees the zone as the 'food basket' of the nation. This informed the reason he used the personal plural pronoun 'our' to show solidarity with his people in the phrase 'our country' and 'them' to create an out-group. Such proclamation is self-centered. There cannot be a country within a country. There must be mutual agreement and amendment of the constitution before that could be permitted. Failure to do so will amount to a criminal offence. The comment is therefore sentimental because they are not the only part of the country contributing to the growth and development of the country. The writer makes it look as if the Niger delta is the only region that is contributing to the nation and discriminates against other ethnic groups in the country. This comment makes other ethnic groups look useless in the country.

These comments promote ethnic sentiment and segregation in the country. This is capable of disintegrating the country as ethnic groups will see one another as enemies. There are elements of convergence and divergence in what the writer means but not written. Implicature is used to promote ethnic sentiment. This conforms to the Giles and Johnson (1981) ethnolinguistic identity theory as evidence of segregation and solidarity are glaring in the comments through the use of implicature.

5.3 Pronoun usage

Pronouns are used to replace nouns, grammatically. They are also used to avoid monotony in discourse. Ayantayo (2019) notes that pronouns are also used to deemphasise the involvement of a person in a discourse. Cornish (1986) also explains that pronoun involves the avoidance of redundancy or repetition by the use of a semantically attenuated expression in place of a full lexical expression initially used. In Facebook discourse, pronoun is used to promote in- and out-groups. This is seen in the choice of words by readers' responses. The post to which people commented is about the agitation of the Niger Delta militants to have their own country. Niger Delta states in Nigeria comprise of 9 states, Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers states. These states are the states with crude oil where Nigeria taps most of its resources. The states in this region are agitating for resource control. There are several ethnic groups in the region, among which are IPOB, MASSOB, Niger Delta Avengers, etc. These groups have been attacking government and multinational companies. Other ethnic groups in the country mostly describe them as militants. In this discourse, a pronoun is used by commenters to either 'include' or 'exclude' themselves. The following excerpts reveal the use of pronouns to promote ethnic sentiment.

6. Make **ona** (you) tell **them** about **our** new nation 'NAIJA DELTA COUNTRY' the homes of renewable resourcse (sic)
7. **My** people, let **us** be wise because the bible says that **we** should be wise like sapient (sic).

In excerpts 6 and 7, pronouns are used for solidarity and segregation. It is used to exclude others who do not belong to the same ethnic group as the commenter and include those that belong to the same ethnic group. Pronouns such as **ona (you), them, our, and my and us** are used in the above excerpts. **'Ona'** is the second person pronoun **you** in Nigerian pidgin. *Ona and them* are used by the commenter to refer to other ethnic groups in the country but the **Naija delta people**, as seen in the reference to **Naija delta country. Our** is first person plural pronoun that is used to refer to people in the same ethnic group. The pronouns are used in the responses to show solidarity and segregation between ethnic groups. We can easily infer that the writer belongs to NAIJA DELTA. The pronoun **our** and **my** make the understanding of this possible as a solidarity pronoun while **ona (you),** and **them** are used to show exclusion from the Naija Delta ethnic group**.**

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More examples are seen in the following excerpts. In excerpt 7, **my, us,** and **we** also perfume the same function of solidarity.

8. *I am from Delta state. **we** can't (cannot) face the whole of north and west and middle belt alone in war(sic) together with **their** international allies which are hunting for **our** oil too.*
9. *Some of **them** are afraid to join the struggle because of Nigeria (sic) intimidation and killing all over Nigeria.*
10. *Whatever Hausa Fulani will do on earth will never be impressed by **those** people. So don't waste your time because **they** can't (cannot) stop what God had already design (sic).*

Excerpt 8 is culled from the Facebook page of MEND. **We** is used in the excerpt as the agent in the sentence to refer to the people of the Niger Delta. The comment shows the weakness of the Niger delta to confront other ethnic groups in the country. This presents the group as the victim of injustice in the country. The pronoun **our** is a possessive pronoun used to show ownership of the natural resources which is the reason for agitation. The two pronouns (**we** and **our)** are used to include the Niger Delta loyalist while excluding other ethnic groups in the country with the use of the pronoun **their**. **Their** as used in the excerpt to show other ethnic groups in the country, namely ***north and west*** as can be seen in the excerpt. The commenter presents his ethnic group as a victim of collaboration between other ethnic groups and ***international allies*** to exploit the Niger delta resources. In excerpt 9, **them** is used to show the weakness of other members of MASSOB who are scared of joining the ethnic group for the 'liberation struggle'. The pronoun is used to present others as timid and weak. This is an in-group sentiment. This set of people is referred to as betrayal. Except 10 is culled from the Facebook page of APC. In the excerpt, **those** is used to present other ethnic groups in the country except the **Hausa** ethnic group**.** The commenter sees other ethnic groups as enemies who are never satisfied with whatever the Hausa Fulani is doing. **They** also refers to other groups and describe them as weak and incapable of stopping what God is doing. One can infer from this that the commenter insinuates that Hausa is enjoying God's favour which others are not enjoying.

In excerpts 8, 9, and 10, pronouns are used to show in- and out-group. **We** and **our** are used to show convergence in the discourse. **Their, them, they, and, those** are used to

refer to others who do not belong to the same ethnic group and therefore show divergence. They are used as instruments of sentiment and discrimination.

The pronouns help to identify ethnic sentiment in the response of the readers. This is in tandem with Giles and Johnson (1981) because the writer succeeded in dividing the society with the use of pronouns. This is capable of disintegrating the country along ethnic lines. The social implication is obvious as people will not be accommodating to one another and it breeds ethnic bigotry in the society.

There is also the use of Deictic pronouns**.** Mey (2000) submits that deixis entails the process of 'showing by means of language; that is, 'pointing' at things/objects/persons by means of special words. These are words that are used by speakers to point at objects or persons. Understanding of deixis is context-based. Without the knowledge of the context of the speaker, it becomes excessively difficult to understand the meaning. Yule (2010) identifies three forms of deixis; spatial deixis, person deixis, and temporal deixis. Spatial deixis points to location while person deixis points to a person and temporal deixis points to time. Mey (ibid) notes that certain pronouns and adverbs (of time and place) are characteristic pointers of deixis. The pronouns and adverbs point to persons, time, and even location. In Facebook discourse, there are deictic words that are used to point to person and place. This deixis is used to create polarity and identity in society.

On the Facebook page of the OPC, there is a post that discussed the activities of the MASSOB; the attack on government properties, and subsequent destruction. There are various reactions to the post depending on individual prejudice. The following are examples of comments that reflect ethnic sentiment.

11. *It is better to die for what one believed in… we will continue following Maazi rather than following **those** bloodsucking looters.*
12. *No other tribe is known for greed and selfishness except where **you** originated from.*
13. ***You** are a great man. **You** deserve great honour, **we** love **your** kind of personality. It is **your** kind of personality **we** need in this modern age. **You** make **our** tribe pride (sic). **Our** tribe is not like **theirs**.*

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> ***14.*** *My director the agitation of our lovely country Biafra must slowly come to pass,* ***we*** *don't belong* ***here***. *Let's leave them.*

In excerpt 19, the writer claimed that he/she prefers to die than to live with **those** bloodsucking looters. The pronoun **those** points to other ethnic groups in the discourse. The referent cannot be ascertained as no name was mentioned. The pronoun **those** only points at others excluding self. This is used to create a polarity between the ethnic groups. It is sentimental as it excluded others from the writer's ethnic group. Other deixes such as **you, your, and theirs** are used for exclusion while **we and our** are used for inclusion. These are person deixis**. You** is a second person singular plural pronoun that is used to point to others. It functions as the subject here that assigns a role to the verb *make*. The name was earlier mentioned (as my director) but never mentioned again but pointed to with the use of the pronoun **you. Your** and **theirs** are possessive pronouns that show ownership. They are used to point to persons that readers may not understand except they share similar background knowledge. **Those, you, your,** and **their** can be referred to as exclusion deixis while **our, we, and here** may be referred to as inclusion deixis.

The *exclusion deixis* is used to point to others outside the ethnic group of the writer. The deixis foregrounds sentiment in the discourse. Those that belong to the in-group are welcome and celebrated but those that belong to the out-group are segregated against. Language becomes an instrument here as posit by Giles and Johnson (1981). Deixes are used to create class and status in society. For example, *You are a great man.* ***You*** *deserve great honour,* ***we*** *love* ***your*** *kind of personality. It is* ***your*** *kind of personality* ***we*** *need in this modern age.* ***You*** *make* ***our*** *tribe pride (sic).* ***Our*** *tribe is not like* ***theirs***. The addressed person and ethnic groups are ranked high in status which makes the people embrace their activities. This reflects solidarity in the use of language. The writer adopts deictic pronouns to segregate against others while he/she associated with his/her ethnic group. This is capable of generating ethnic rivalry and bigotry in society. Those that are excluded and discriminated against will not be happy and hate others that excluded them. Their retaliation may lead to a crisis in society. The outcome of such retaliation is better imagined than experienced.

 5.4 Invective words

Invectives are abusive words used to condemn others. It is used to show hatred towards others in society. These words are usually not acceptable because they are competitive. Olekalns & Smith, (2003) state that the hallmark of competitive languages is by behaviours such as justifications, irrelevant arguments, personal attacks, and excessive demands and threats. Invective words are usually an attack on person(s) and a threat to public self-image. It usually promotes sentiments.

On the Facebook page of MASSOB, there is a post about resource control and the plan demonstration of the MASSOB to tell the whole world that they want 'their own country'. The post also talked about the 'sit-at-home' plan of the Niger Delta militant. This is against the will of the government, not only because it is unproductive economically but because it shows the militant has hijacked governance. Expectedly, it is only the constituted authority that has the power to declare curfew in any society. The plan of the militant displeased other parts of the population in the society. They are however soliciting support from society through the post. The post also causes division among the loyalist of the group on Facebook. While some want them to seek help, some believed they are self-sufficient. This leads to different name-calling and the use of invective words about other ethnic groups in the country. The following are excerpts from the readers' responses.

15. *Northernians, Hausa/Fulani and southwest, Yoruba in Nigeria are **evil, wicked, thieves, and selfcentered (sic) animals**. They are not worthy to stay with anybody in the world.*
16. *No other tribe is known for **greed** and **selfishness** except where you originated from.*

The words **evil, wicked, thieves, greed, and selfishness** are used as nouns to co-refer to the ethnic groups mentioned earlier in the sentence. The writer decided to put them in the same grammatical category as the ethnic names to equate them with those ethnic groups. This results in direct comparison. Readers will therefore see those ethnic groups as evil, wicked, thieves, greed, selfish, and consequently attempt to avoid them in the society. This may create societal stigma and rejection. It attacks the public self-image of the ethnicities mentioned. These invective words are competitive. The use of invective words is sentimental and capable of disintegrating the country. This aligns with Taylor

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(2014) who states that a person using a competitive form of language focuses on self and a motivation to maximize personal outcome even at the expense of the other party. Excerpt 12 is a comment by a northerner on the same post. **Greed and selfishness** are used to derogatorily refer to easterners. The comment is a rejoinder to the allegation that the northerners are evil. Words such as **greed** and **selfishness** are evidence of invective words to discriminate against others in Facebook discourse. It also follows Giles and Johnson (1981) convergence and divergence in society.

5.5 Naming and reference

Every individual and situation is named and referenced. This gives a signal to who and what the person and situation are. It allows a third party to understand who the person is. It is also important to state that the way we want people to be seen and understood in society is the way we name them. The way we name and refer an individual determines the way society will accept the person. Following Richardson (2007:49) the way people are named in discourse can have a significant impact on how they are viewed. To promote ethnic sentiment in Facebook discourse, a member of an ethnic group foregrounds the 'good' of their ethnic group and background the 'good' of others through naming and reference.

On the Facebook page of the chosen groups, there are assertions that a particular part of the country has been ruling the country for a long without consideration for the other parts of the country. This action was condemned on the pages with different opinions from different commenters. In the comments, there are elements of ethnic sentiment. Nigeria as a nation is also condemned and reduced to a park displaying different live animals.

> 17. *The ultimate thing to do is to disintegrate **zoo (sic)** called Nigeria.*

In excerpt 13, Nigeria is referred to as a zoo. A zoo is a place where animals are kept for display. With this, the commenter is equating 'Nigerians' (excluding his ethnic group) to animals. When a human is referred to as an animal is to be brutish. This reference is derogatory and reflects ethnic sentiment. The expression **zoo called Nigeria** shows that the commenter is not a member of the group.

In the same post on the MASSOB page, there is another comment that reflects ethnic sentiment. A northerner on the page disagrees with the claim that the northerner has been ruling for a long and therefore called for peace in the country. To the commenter, it is only peace that can solve Nigeria's problem and not conflict. This sermon got other commenters angry. The response to those comments promotes ethnic sentiment as seen in the following excerpt.

18. *Another **herdsmen (sic)** talking. Shame on you **blood sucker.***

Words such as **herdsmen** and **bloodsucker** in excerpt 14 reflect ethnic sentiment. This reference has metaphorically likened the commenter to the herdsmen. At the moment, the herdsmen are clashing with different rural villagers and killing them. In the attacks, there are bloodshed and loss of properties. The herdsmen are presumably northerners. This is the reason the second commenter refers to the first commenter as **herdsmen and bloodsuckers**. The comment derogatorily refers to the first commenter as herdsmen and bloodsucker so that the whole world will perceive all northerners as bloodsuckers. This is capable of creating hatred towards the northerners in society. The choice of the word **another** in the excerpt presupposes that the commenter is not referring to the first commenter alone. It suggests that he/she is referring to the whole ethnic group.

On the Facebook page of the Arewa People's Congress (APC), there is a post on the activities of the Biafra militants and the Nigerian military. The post also talked about some Nigerians arrested in Malaysia for fraud. In the post, the writer insinuates that most of the people arrested are Ibo and the writer calls on Nigerians in the diaspora to come home and develop the country rather than committing crime outside the country and presenting the country negatively to the entire world. On the post, some comments explain ethnic sentiment. The Ibo are referred to differently with different names. There are also referents to the northerners. Words such as Boko haram terrorist, herdsmen militants, dirty thieves are some of the lexes used to refer to the northerners. These words create a divergence in the country among ethnic groups. Furthermore, the easterners are also referred to in the comment box with different sentimental words. Some of such words include **lazybiafra**, **biafraud**, **terrorist,** and so on.

19. ***Boko haram killer*** *is talking rubbish.*

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*20. Another **biafraud terrorist** showing his level.*

Boko haram is a terrorist group operating majorly in the northern part of the country. They kill people and destroy properties on a large scale. Referring to a commenter as **Boko haram** is sentimental because there is not enough evidence to show that the commenter is a member of Boko haram. The commenter referred to this person with the insinuation that the person is from the north. This allegation is not healthy because some northern elites and cultural groups are also condemning the actions of **Boko haram.** Consequently, referring to the whole north as **Boko haram** is sentimental. The word **biafruad** in excerpt 16 is a combination of clipped Biafra as '**bia**' and fraud. The **bia** represent **Biafra** which is the ethnic name of a section of the country while fraud is a crime of cheating others. This linguistic innovation to combine a morpheme from the ethnic name, Biafra is derogatory and reflects ethnic sentiment. It is simply calling all Biafrans cheaters and criminals. This should be discouraged because it is capable of disintegrating society. The reference will affect the interaction between and among people of different ethnic backgrounds and consequently lead to social disharmony.

In the above excerpts, we see naming and reference as an instrument of ethnic sentiment in the hand of Facebook. Facebook users present others that do not belong to their ethnic group negatively to society. This is not safe for a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria.

5.6 Qualifiers

Qualifiers are used to give a vivid descriptions of an object or event. They give the readers or listeners a better understanding of the object or event. The qualifier may be post or pre-positioned. In Facebook discourse, it is used to create beliefs depending on the prejudice of participants. As we shall see below, qualifiers are used to promote ethnic sentiment.

On MEND's Facebook page, there is a post on the activities of the militant group and the response of the government. In the post, the writer claimed that the group will outsmart the government to achieve its aim of resource control, either peacefully or by force. This post attracts different comments from people of different ethnic backgrounds. Qualifiers like cheat, dishonest, and fraud are used to describe different ethnic groups in the comment box. In the following excerpt, the Ibo are described as brainy and cunning.

> 21. *the Ibo tribe are (sic) set (sic) of **brainy and cunning** tribe that enjoys killing others to go through that is why I can never support state of biafra because it will never involve killings and making away of (sic) money and cheating.*

In excerpt 17, the writer qualifies the Ibo as **brainy**. This means they are intelligent and smart. The writer also describes them as **cunning**. This means that they are crafty and deceitful. The qualifiers are prepositioned. This shows that the writer wants readers to read the qualifiers before the tribe to present them to the reader with a particular ideology of being 'crafty'. It co-refers to the ethnic name mentioned earlier in the statement. One can easily conclude that the use of brainy is sarcastic. It simply means that the brain they have and the intelligence are used for dubious things. This is sentimental because numerous Ibo people are engaging in decent and legally recognized businesses. It is also important to state that criminality does not have ethnic limitations. The qualifiers adopted by the writer only discriminate against the Ibo ethnic group.

On the same page, other commenters condemned the activities of the MEND especially as it relates to the killing and destruction of properties. These commenters were attacked and qualified differently by other commenters with different words that reflect ethnic sentiment. Words such as infidels, cowardice, and unsatisfied are used to describe them.

> 22. *Let the shame of Fulani **infidels, cowardice and (sic) unsatisfied** greed for power and blood pressure prepare you all with Jubril Alsudan Buhari impersonated ...*

The qualifiers are post position to the ethnic group they qualified. In excerpt 18, the commenter was described as **infidel** which means he is an unbeliever. He is described as somebody without God. He is also described as **coward** and **unsatisfied** greed. This description discriminates against the person. The person is understood to be Fulani in the discourse. The comment discriminates against the ethnic group in this comment. In the comments, qualifiers are used to create ethnic sentiment in Facebook communication. Different qualifiers are positioned with the ethnic groups they described; with the intention of segregating them. Ibo and Fulani ethnic groups are majorly discriminated against in the discourse, using qualifiers.

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6.   Summary and conclusion

In this work, we have been able to show that language is used as a strong instrument to show solidarity and a serious weapon to reflect the ethnic differences. This agrees with Giles and Johnson (1981) that language reflects convergence and divergence in society. Despite the availability of the language of wider communication (LWC), ethnic discrimination is still reflecting in the response of Nigerians to Facebook posts. Facebook users freely use derogatory language against those that do not belong to their ethnic group. There are linguistic and sociolinguistic features that are used to achieve this aim. The linguistic features are; pronouns, qualifiers, deictic pronouns, and implicatures. The sociolinguistic features are; naming and reference, invective/insults, and tribal references. There are shreds of evidences of stereotype in the use of language to address others. The use of insult, name-calling, and accusations also suffice in the discourse. Facebook users used language as an instrument of unity and a weapon of separation to reflect the 'in-group' and 'out-group'. Name-calling and references are evidence of the belief that people hold towards each ethnic group in the contemporary world. For example, the Hausa/Fulani are seen as power drunk. The Yoruba are seen as betrayals by other ethnic groups while the Ibos are seen as 'lovers' of money who can do anything to get money. This has degenerated to the social media pages.

These sentiments are not a result of different languages because they used the same language (English language) but as a result of limited and mismanagement of resources, lack of trust, intolerance, social, and religious ideological differences. There are social implications to this form of language use. It creates ethnic polarity, animosity, and hatred in the society. Such language use usually leads to ethnic bigotry.

7.   Recommendations

Human beings may come from different sects and origins but nobody can leave in isolation. The choice of words may make or mar a relationship. Consequently, it is better to be conscious of our choice of words. It is believed in the Yoruba worldview that *Orin ló ń síwájú òtè* (song precedes war). The use of language on social media could spur war in the contemporary world. Whatever agitation we have, it is better to express it using legal and sincere means that will be devoid of crisis and hatred which may result in an unnecessary crisis. It is pertinent to imbibe the spirit of tolerance. This study

consequently recommends the use of cooperative language which promotes harmony in the society as against competitive language that promotes disharmony as we currently experience in the readers' response to Facebook discourse. This study recommends the study of language and ethnic sentiment on other social media platforms like Twitter, Whatsapp, and Instagram. We also recommend research into other languages phenomenal such as language competition and rivalry on social media.

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